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THE RED MIST



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"I demand to know, first of all, where you got possession of that
Third U. S. Cavalry uniform"

[*Page 172*]

THE RED MIST

A Tale of Civil Strife

BY

RANDALL PARRISH

ILLUSTRATED BY

ALONZO KIMBALL



CHICAGO

A. C. McCLURG & CO.

1914

THE RED MIST

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THE RED MIST

A TALE OF CIVIL STRIFE

CHAPTER I

ON SPECIAL SERVICE



T WAS already growing dusk when the Staunton Battery of Horse Artillery returned wearily to camp after hours of hard field drill, the men ever conscious that no evolution, however trivial, was being overlooked by "Stonewall" Jackson, sitting astride his sorrel on a little eminence to the left, his stern face unrelieved by even the semblance of a smile. He would criticise without mercy, but never praise, and the artillerymen insensibly stiffened to the work, as eager to do well as though they were in action.

The time was early spring, some remnants of snow still clinging to the hollows out of reach of the warming sun, and a chill wind blowing through the passes of the western mountains. The comparative idleness of the past winter months, given

over to foraging and drill, together with the comforts of a permanent camp, had engendered forgetfulness of the hardships of the last campaign, and left the men eager to confront the dangers of the future. In no heart was there doubt of the final result — the Army of the Valley pinned its faith on “Old Jack.” They were soldiers — veterans already — anxious for active service; their depleted ranks filled up once more with recruits, well drilled and efficient through constant training; and while many remembered with regret the old faces — the dead, the wounded, the missing — they nevertheless realized that never before were they in sterner mood or better prepared for grim fighting.

The winter quarters of the Staunton Artillery were slightly off the main road, back within the shelter of a grove of oak trees, and I remained for some time overseeing the care of the horses before approaching the hut where the non-commissioned officers had mess. We were all of us still at the table, discussing the incidents of the drill, when a lieutenant appeared suddenly in the doorway, and glanced inquiringly about the room, scarcely able to distinguish our faces in the dull light of the lantern which alone illumined the interior.

“Sergeant Wyatt?” he inquired briefly.

I arose to my feet.

"Here, sir," I answered in some surprise.

"You are requested to report to General Jackson at once."

"At Winchester, sir?"

"No; his headquarters for tonight are at Coulter's farm, on the dirt pike. You will ride your own horse."

I endeavored to circle the others, and thus reach the door in time to ask further questions, but was too late; the lieutenant, his message delivered, had already disappeared in the darkness. I stared after him in perplexity. What could Jackson possibly want of me? On whose recommendation had I been thus singled out for special service? How, indeed, had the commanding general even learned my name? I stood hesitating in the open door, listening to the hoof beats of the officer's horse, my mind filled with wonderment. But I was a soldier, thoroughly disciplined, and orders must be obeyed. The pause, the doubt, were but momentary. Five minutes later I was guiding my own horse down the same dark road, bending low in the saddle, obsessed with a feeling that this mission, whatever it might turn out to be, promised a change in my fortunes.

It was an ugly path, rutted deep by artillery wheels, and dangerous for the horse. On either side glowed the blaze of camp fires, and the sound of

voices could be heard. One group was lustily singing songs of the South, and I passed a shop, the door wide open, the farrier busy shoeing cavalry horses, their riders lounging idly without.

I was an hour reaching the dirt pike, although the distance was not great, and I knew the way well. There I encountered infantry pickets, who became more vigilant, and inquisitive, as I approached closer to the Coulter house. This was a double log cabin, erected in a grove of trees, some fifty feet or more back from the road, and surrounded by a slab fence. A squadron of cavalry were encamped in the yard, their horses saddled, and tied to the palings, while the lights gleaming through the windows, together with the dying glow of a fire to the right, dimly revealed a group of men clustered on the front porch. It was with some difficulty that I made my way through the obstructing guard to the foot of the steps, where an officer, whose face was indistinguishable, took my name, and repeated it to an orderly stationed at the closed door. The latter disappeared in a sudden blaze of light, and I stood there silently in the shadows waiting.

Ten minutes must have elapsed before the door opened again, and I heard my name called. The group of waiting officers fell aside, and I passed in between them, unable to recognize a face. Once

within I glanced curiously about the bare room, noting its occupants, and their rude surroundings. It was a rough appearing, commonplace interior, the log walls once whitewashed, but now streaked with dirt, the only furniture visible a few home-made chairs, and an ordinary kitchen table. A sturdy fire burned in the fireplace, and three lamps illumined the scene, revealing the presence of five men, among whom I instantly recognized Ewell, Ashby, together with Jackson, and his chief of staff. The fifth occupant of the room sat alone in one corner, his face partially concealed, revealing little other than a fringe of gray whiskers. Jackson and his aide were seated behind the table, which was littered with papers and maps, and as the former glanced up, at the announcement of the orderly, I came instantly to attention, my hand lifted in salute. The general's stern blue eyes surveyed me intently.

"Sergeant Wyatt, Staunton Artillery?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long, may I ask, have you been in the service?"

"Since May, '61, sir."

"Ah! indeed. And your age?"

"Twenty-four, sir."

He made some remark aside to the aide, who nodded back, and pointed to a map before them.

"You are a younger man in appearance than I had expected to see, Sergeant," Jackson said slowly. "Yet I have learned within the last year to have confidence in young men. War is a swift developer of manhood. Your colonel speaks of you in the highest terms, and informs me that you are a native of Green Briar County."

"Our home was at Lewisburg, sir."

"Then you are doubtless intimately acquainted with that section?"

"Very well, indeed, General."

Jackson sat motionless and in silence for what seemed a long while, his grave eyes on my face, but his mind evidently elsewhere, one hand unconsciously crumpling a folded paper. Ashby moved his chair, causing it to crunch noisily on the floor, and the commander aroused at the unusual sound.

"By any possibility are you related to Judge Joel Wyatt?" he questioned slowly.

"He was my father, sir."

"I thought it was not improbable. There is a noticeable resemblance, and I recall he lived west of the mountains. I knew your father in Mexico. Is he still living?"

"He has been dead two years."

"I regret to hear it. Your mother, unless I am mistaken, was a Farquhar, of North Carolina?"

“Yes, sir — she has returned to her old home.”

“The best of southern blood, gentlemen,” he said smilingly, glancing toward the others, but with watchful eyes instantly returning to scan me. “Was she driven out of Green Briar by the state of unrest in that section?”

“In a measure — yes,” I replied promptly. “It was hardly safe for her to remain there alone. The county is filled with Union sympathizers, and roamed over by bands of guerrillas, claiming allegiance with both sides, but sparing no one. At present, I understand, Federal troops have been sent there from Charleston, and are in control.”

“Your information is partially correct; but in order to perfect plans now contemplated I require a still more definite knowledge of existing conditions. I need to know accurately the number and distribution of the Union forces in Green Briar, and also more complete information regarding those irregulars who are in sympathy with us, as well as the character of their leaders. Judging from the recommendation given you by Colonel Maitland I felt that you were peculiarly adapted to render this service. However, Sergeant Wyatt, I propose stating plainly that this may prove an exceedingly dangerous detail, and if you decide to accept it, it must be done as a volunteer.”

He paused questioningly, and I drew a quick breath, realizing suddenly the seriousness of the situation, and the importance of my decision.

"I am perfectly ready to go, sir."

"I have felt little doubt as to that, but I wish you to comprehend clearly that we can offer you no protection if your secret mission is discovered."

"I so understand, General Jackson, I know the usages of war, but this is not a question of danger, but of duty. You desire that I depart at once?"

Ewell broke in impatiently with his high pitched voice.

"May I ask if it be generally known in Green Briar that you are enlisted in the Confederate service?"

"To but very few, sir," I answered, turning to look across at my unexpected questioner. "To none I am at all likely to encounter. My mother and I left the county at the first outbreak. My father's affiliations were with the Union element."

"Most fortunate. Nothing could be better, General Jackson. The sergeant can very safely travel as a Federal officer in search of recruits. The matter of papers can, of course, be easily arranged."

Jackson turned toward his aide.

"What Federal troops are now garrisoning Charleston, Swan?"

“An Ohio brigade, with a regiment of Pennsylvania cavalry. There is also a company of heavy artillery outside the town.”

The commander leaned his head on his hand.

“I would like to suggest, sir,” I ventured to say respectfully, “that General Ewell’s plan be adopted. I think I shall have no difficulty in assuming the role.”

“You are willing then to assume the risk?” He looked at me gravely. “It may eventually mean a drum-head court-martial, and death as a spy.”

“If I fail — yes, sir; but this method surely offers the greatest possibility of success.”

“I can clearly perceive that, but it was not my original plan to send you into the lines of the enemy in Federal uniform. However General Ewell’s judgment is probably correct. Have you a late Army List there, Colonel Swan?”

“Yes, sir, issued the fourteenth.” He turned the pages slowly, leaning forward to the light. “Here is a Lieutenant Raymond, Third U. S. Cavalry, reported on recruiting detail. His regiment is stationed at Fairfax Court House.”

“He will answer as well as any other. It is scarcely probable the man would be known in that remote section. What is the full name? and where is he from?”

"Charles H.; appointed from Vermont."

"Is this choice satisfactory to you, sergeant?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"You are prepared to depart immediately?"

"As soon as I can be furnished with the necessary papers and equipment."

"Colonel Swan will arrange the first, and the quartermaster can doubtless supply the other requirements. Orderly, have Major Kline step in here at once. Ah, Kline, have you among your trophies of war a Federal lieutenant's uniform which will probably fit this man?"

"I believe so, sir," and the officer addressed ran his eyes appraisingly over my figure. "Any particular regiment?"

"Third, United States Cavalry. Have it pressed and sent here at once, securely wrapped, together with saber and revolvers. Where is your horse, sergeant?"

"Tied to the palings outside."

"Do you desire a better mount?"

"No sir, the animal is fresh, and a good traveler."

"Then that will be all, Kline; except, of course, complete Federal cavalry equipment for the horse."

The officer saluted, and disappeared, the door instantly closing behind him, cutting off the hum of voices without. There was a moment of silence.

"You had better retain your present dress until after you leave the valley," counseled Jackson, slowly. "Swan will furnish you with a pass, which should be carefully destroyed after passing our pickets at Covington. It will be of no service to you beyond that point. My best wishes for your success, Sergeant Wyatt."

He stood up, and I felt the firm grasp of his hand. Then Ashby gripped my shoulder.

"Wyatt," he said kindly, "if you ever desire to change your arm of the service, you are the kind of man I want to ride with me."

I smiled in appreciation, but before I could answer, the man who had been sitting silently in the corner arose, and stood erect in the light. The gleam of the lamp instantly revealed his face still shadowed by the wide hat brim, the firm, bearded chin, the gravely smiling eyes.

"General Ashby," he said with quiet dignity, "Sergeant Wyatt, I am sure, performs this important duty without thought of reward. It is the South that has need of such men in every branch of her service." He came forward, and extended his hand cordially.

"I am General Lee, and am very glad to greet, and wish God speed to the son of Judge Wyatt. If you return in safety, you will report to me in person

at Richmond. General Jackson will so arrange with your battery commander."

They were all upon their feet, standing in respectful attention. I murmured something, I scarcely knew what, bowing as I backed toward the door. And this was Lee — Robert E. Lee — this man with the kind, thoughtful face, the gentle voice, the gravely considerate manner. And he had greeted me in words of personal friendship, had spoken to me of my father. I know I straightened to soldierly erectness, every pulse thrilling with a new resolve. A moment I stood there, my eyes on the one face I saw before me, and then went out into the darkness. The orderly closed the door.

CHAPTER II

AN UNWELCOME COMPANION



IT WAS in the chill of a cold, gray morning that I rode into Strasburg, jogging along at the rear of a squadron of Fifth Virginia cavalrymen who chanced to be headed for the same place. These found quarters in the town, but I proceeded a mile or more south on the valley pike, until I reached a cabin hidden behind a low hill, and so surrounded by a dense growth of scrubby trees as to be nearly concealed from observation. Only a chance glance in that direction had revealed its presence, but its very look of desolation instantly attracted me. Here was a place to rest quietly for a few hours in safety. I turned my willing horse aside, following an ill-defined path through a tangled mass of shrubbery, until I attained the door. The building was a single-roomed cabin, exhibiting marks of age and neglect, yet still intact, heavy wooden shutters barring the windows, the door closed and securely fastened. The place to all appearances was deserted, and had been for a long while. Although situated scarcely a hundred

feet back from the valley turnpike, which was never without its travelers, and along which armies marched and counter-marched, the surroundings were those of a remote wilderness. I bent down from my saddle, and rapped sharply on the wood. There was no response from within, not even when I struck more heavily with the butt of a revolver. There was a faint trail leading about the corner, and, grown curious and impatient, I dismounted, and leading my horse, pressed a difficult passage through the bushes. To my surprise the rear door stood slightly ajar, and my eyes perceived the movement of an ill-defined shadow within.

“Hello, there!” I called out, yet instinctively drawing a step backward. “Is there any room here for a tired man?”

The tall, angular figure of a mountaineer immediately appeared in the doorway, and a gray, wrinkled face, scraggly bearded, looked forth. the eyes glinting, and filled with suspicion.

“Wus it you-all poundin’ at the door?”

“I knocked — yes.”

“Knocked! Ye made noise ’nough ter raise the dead.”

“It seems I didn’t raise you.”

“I want lookin’ fer no visitors. Wal, who be ye? an’ whut do ye want yere?”

"I am a soldier," I replied, rather shortly, not particularly pleased with either the man's appearance or manner. "Myself and horse are about worn out. I mistook this for a deserted cabin."

"Wal, it ain't precisely. Are you Confed?"

"Of course — no Yank would be along this pike."

"I ain't so blamed sure o' thet. Whar be ye bound? an' whut may ye be up to a travelin' alone?"

I smiled, endeavoring to retain my temper.

"See, here, friend," I returned shortly. "I have as much reason to ask you such questions as you have me. However, I am willing enough to answer. I am on furlough, and am going home across the mountains to see my folks."

"Whar to?"

"Over Beckley way."

"The hell ye are! Don't ye know the Yanks are all through the kintry now? They'll gobble ye up afore ever ye git to New River."

"Oh, I reckon not — I know that section, and where to hide out. That is why I am going back there now. Do you know Raleigh County?"

The man, who was now standing upright in the doorway, one hand gripping the barrel of a musket, the early morning light on his withered face, stared unwinkingly into my eyes.

"I rather reckon I do, young man," he replied slowly. "Fur I was raised up on the Green Briar. What mout be yer name?"

"Cowan," I answered promptly, my mind instantly alert, and aware I had made a mistake."

"Ho! Ye don't say! One o' ol' Ned Cowan's boys?"

"No. I am a son of Widow Cowan, over on Coal Creek."

There was not the faintest glimmer in the cold, blue eyes, no evidence of any recollection in the wrinkled face. His jaws rose and fell on the tobacco which extended his cheek.

"I don't reckon I've been over that a way fer nigh on fifteen year," he said at last reflectively. "An' somehow I don't just recall no Widow Cowan — but I know ol' Ned mighty well. He's took to the brush with his whole breed since this fracas started, an' som' cusses burned his house, an' sent the ol' woman after 'em. It's plumb hell in Green Briar. Maybe yer a Cowan, but I'm damned if ye look like eny o' thet outfit ever I see afore. What part o' the army wus ye with?"

"Sixty-fifth Virginia — Covington Company, Captain Daniels."

The older man chewed awhile in silence, evidently impressed with the seeming frankness of the reply.

“Wal, ye mout be a Cowan, o’ course. I ain’t takin’ no sides on that fer I don’t know all ther breed,” he admitted reluctantly. “Enyhow I reckon it don’t make no great difference, fer if ye be goin’ ter Green Briar we kin ride awhile tergether. Two is better than one these days. Hitch yer hoss out thar in the scrub along side o’ mine, an’ then come in yere. We’ll eat a bite fust, an’ then lie down a spell, fer I’ve been a ridin’ most o’ ther night myself.”

His voice was hardly as cordial as his words sounded, but I felt it best to accept the rather surly invitation. I led my horse down the dim path indicated, until I came to where the other animal — a rangy, ill-groomed sorrel — was securely hidden. I had blindly stepped into a trap, but just what kind I could not as yet determine. I must win the man’s confidence, and learn what I could. The fellow, whoever he might prove to be, was evidently in concealment — but for what reason? Was he deserter? or spy? And, if it was true, as he claimed, that he was also bound for the Green Briar, how was I to easily avoid traveling in his company? To refuse would arouse suspicion at once, and might plunge me into greater peril. Yet, if, on the other hand, we did continue to consort, how was I to conceal my real purpose and identity? Once we were

in the neighborhood of Lewisburg, my impromptu claim of being a Cowan would be easily exploded. I had assumed that particular name on the spur of the moment, chancing to remember there was such a family prominent along the Green Briar, but the deception would be very apparent so soon as we crossed the mountains. Even now I had grave reason to doubt if I had actually deceived this man by my sudden invention. There had been a look in those glinting blue eyes that told of cunning suspicion. However, at present nothing remained but to play out the game and thus gain all the advantage possible. Whoever the man might prove to be — spy, scout, bushwhacker, or deserter — beyond all question he possessed intimate knowledge of the country lying beyond the Alleghanies. He knew the existing conditions there, and was acquainted with the people. Once his confidence could be fully secured, providing his sympathies were with the cause of the South, as was most probable, his information would be of the utmost value. And surely, if we journeyed together, there would be some revelation of his identity, his reason for being where he was, and the side he espoused in the quarrel. Reticent as he was, suspicious and close-mouthed, a silent, typical mountaineer, he could surely be induced to let fall some scrap of information. And

somewhere along the way an opportunity must surely arise whereby I might escape from his company, if such a move became really desirable. The fellow could not remain on guard night and day, and once convinced of my honesty his suspicions would naturally relax. Revolving these thoughts rapidly in my mind I returned to the hut, carefully bearing the bundle containing the Federal uniform tucked under my arm. The gaunt mountaineer, busily engaged in preparing breakfast at the open fireplace, scarcely favored me with a glance of recognition, but began to arrange the scant supply of food on an overturned box.

“Just pitch in, an’ help yerself, Cowan,” he said affecting a cordiality of manner not altogether natural. “Thar ain’t much of it, but we’ll eat whut we’ve got, an’ then rest awhile. If yer a goin’ ter travel along with me it will be done mostly at night til’ we git down Covington way.”

I seated myself without ceremony.

“You are in hiding then?” I asked carelessly, not even glancing up at the expressionless face opposite.

“Wal’ not exactly. Thars nuthin’ I’m specially feered of, an’ I reckon it’s more habit than anything else. We’ve grown pretty skeery back in the hills — nobody thar knows their friends from their enemies these days. Yer liable ter git popped at most

eny time, an' never know who did it. Yer ain't been thar lately, I reckon?"

"No; not for over a year."

"Things has changed sum since then. Nobody lives ter hum eny more. It's sure hell in Green Briar these days — somebody is gettin' kilt every day er two. The cusses travel in gangs, murderin' an' burnin' from one end o' the county to the other." He spoke in an even drawling voice, with not the slightest show of emotion, as though telling an ordinary bit of news: "Damned if I know which outfit is the wus — the Yanks, or the Rebs."

"Which are you with?"

"Who, me!" He paused in his bolting of food, and gave vent to an unpleasant laugh. "I rather reckon it would puzzle the Lord Almighty ter find that out. I don't give a whoop fer neither of 'em. I'm fer ol' Jem Taylor, an' it keeps me toler'ble busy tending ter his affairs, without botherin' 'bout no government."

"Then your name is Taylor?"

"I reckon it has been fer 'bout sixty years. Thars a slew o' Taylors over along Buffalo Crick, an' som' of 'em are Yanks, an' a parcel of 'em are Rebs, but they don't git ol' Jem ter take nary side. At that, I'm gittin' all the fightin' I hanker arter. Naturally, I'm a peaceful critter, if th' cusses let me alone."

“Quieted down some over there lately, hasn’t it?”

“Not thet I’ve heard of.”

“Why I understood that the Federal troops from Charleston were in control, and held the county?”

“Huh! Thar’s a rigiment o’ blue-coats at Lewisburg, an’ a few cavalrymen ridin’ ther pikes. Don’t amount ter a hill o’ beans as fer as ther boys are concerned. All they got ter do is go further back in the hills, an’ be a bit more keerful. I reckon, young man, ye’ll find plenty o’ deviltry going on in Green Briar, if ye ever git out that away. Wal, thet’s all thar is fer us ter eat, an’ I’m goin’ ter take a snooze.”

He closed the door, fastening it securely with a wooden bar, and stretched himself out on the floor. The room was dark as the only window was tightly boarded up, and, using my bundle for a pillow, I lay down also. For a short time I remained staring up through the dim light, thinking, and endeavoring to plan some feasible course of action, but there was no reason to remain awake, nothing to fear immediately, for his heavy breathing was evidence enough that Taylor slept. Slowly my heavy eyes closed, and I lost consciousness.

The sun was below the mountain ridge, when the heavy hand of the old mountaineer shook me into sudden wakefulness. I had aroused once during

the day, and lay listening to the sound of heavy wagons passing along the pike — a strongly guarded train to judge by the voices of men, and the thud of steadily marching feet. Ammunition, no doubt, destined for the Army of the Valley, in preparation for the coming campaign. Then my eyes had closed again in dreamless sleep. With nothing left to eat we were not long in preparing for departure, I endeavoring vainly to get my silent companion to converse, being rewarded merely by grumbled and evasive answers. Finally I desisted in the attempt, content to follow his lead. Taylor, astride his sorrel, with gun resting grimly across his knees, rode straight through the brush, away from the pike, down the valley of a small stream. In crossing, the horses drank their fill.

“How about the valley road?” I asked as we climbed the opposite bank.

The leader glanced back at me.

“This yere way is nigher, an’ a darn sight mor’ quiet,” he answered gruffly. “Soldiers been marching over the pike all day. Mout be all right fer yer, if yer’ve got a pass — but I ain’t got none. We’ll hev’ good ’nough ridin’ in ’bout a mile mor’.”

“You are aiming for the cut-off?”

“I be — yer do kno’ sumthin’ of this yere kintry, I reckon, but yer’ve got more eddication than eny

Cowan I ever hooked up with afore. Yer don't talk none like mountin' folks."

I drew a quick breath, sensing the return of suspicion.

"That's true," I admitted readily. "You see I went to school at Covington; they were going to make a preacher out of me."

"The hell they wus!" and he chuckled to himself. "A blue-bellied Presbyterian I'll bet a hog. Their the ol' stock — them Cowans — hell fire, infant damnation. So you wus goin' fer ter be a preacher — hey?"

"That was the program."

Taylor stared into my face, his vague suspicion seemingly gone.

"Well, I'll de damned — a preacher."

He rode on into the dusk, chuckling, and I followed, smiling to myself, glad that the man's good humor had been so easily restored.

We were fed at a hut far back in the foot-hills, where an old couple, the man lame, were glad enough to exchange their poor food for late news from the army, in which they had a son. Then we rode on steadily to the south along a deserted, weed-bordered road, meeting no one to obstruct our progress. Earlier in the war the Army of the Kan-awa had passed along this way on forced march,

and the ruts left by battery wheels were still in evidence, the frozen ridges making fast riding impossible. There were no villages, and only a few scattered houses, but the night was not so dark as to prevent fairly rapid progress. When dawn came we were to the west of Waynesboro, in broken country, and all through those long night hours scarcely a word had been exchanged between us. We camped finally in the bend of a small stream, where high banks concealed us from observation. There was little to eat in our haversacks, but we munched what we had, and Taylor, his eyes on the horses, broke the silence.

“I reckon the critters don’t need mor’n a couple hours’ rest,” he said. “They ain’t been rid noways hard, an’ I’m fer gittin’ through the gap durin’ daylight — the road ain’t overly good just now.”

“Across the mountains? Is there a gap here?”

“Ther road ter Hot Springs is ’bout two miles below yer. I cum over it ten days ago an’ I reckon I kin find my way back. It’s ’bout forty miles frum thar ter Lewisburg, mostly hills, but a good trail. I know folks et Hot Springs who will take good keer o’ us, onct we git thar.”

We rested dozing, but neither sound asleep, for nearly three hours. Whatever might be in Taylor’s mind, the lonely night had brought to me a new

thought relative to my companion. The fellow was evasive, and once he had frankly lied in seeking to explain his presence in the valley, and the reason for his secrecy of movement. By now we were decidedly at cross-purposes, each vigilantly watching the other — Taylor in doubt as to what the bundle contained, which I never permitted out of my grasp, and myself as deeply interested in gaining possession of a packet of papers, a glimpse of which I had caught in an inside pocket of the mountaineer's coat. The belief that the fellow was either a Yankee spy, or a messenger between some Union emissary in the Confederate camp, and the Federal commander in western Virginia, became clear and distinct. His explanation that he had been seeking payment for losses occasioned by Confederate troops, was far from convincing. Had this been true he would certainly have been provided with a pass, and there would be no necessity for riding these back roads at night to avoid being challenged. His mission, whatever it might be, was secret and dangerous. Of this his ceaseless vigilance was proof.

We rode on side by side through the rocky gap in the chain of mountains, and along the rough hills beyond, through gloomy stretches of wood, and over wind-swept ridges. It was cold and blustery, the clouds hanging low, and threatening storm. We

were silent, suspicious of each other, never relaxing our vigilance. We encountered few travelers, and with these scarcely exchanged a word. Not a soldier was seen, although there was a Confederate garrison at Covington a few miles to the south. The light of a dying day still clung to the western sky when our wearied horses bore us into the village of Hot Springs. It was like a deserted hamlet, few houses appearing inhabited, and the shop windows boarded up. Occasionally a face peered at us cautiously through closed windows, and a man, tramping across the square, paused to stare curiously in our direction; but these were the only signs of life visible. Over a stone building — possibly the post-office — flapped a small Confederate flag, ragged and disreputable. Taylor, glancing neither to right or left, apparently indifferent to all this desolation, rode straight down the main street, and turned onto a pike road, leading to the left. A mile beyond, a frame house, painted white, barely visible through the deepening dusk, stood in a grove of oaks. The fence surrounding it had been broken down, and the gate stood wide open. The mountaineer turned up the broad driveway, and dismounted before the closed door. Almost at the same moment the portal opened slightly and a black face peered out.

CHAPTER III

THE BODY ON THE FLOOR



AYLOR stood at the foot of the steps, pausing in uncertainty.

“Is that you, Sam?”

“Yas, sah, but I don’t just make out who you gentl’men am, sah.”

“Well, never mind thet now. Is Mister Harwood, yere?”

I insensibly straightened in my saddle. Harwood? What Harwood, I wondered — surely not Major Harwood of Lewisburg, my father’s old friend! What was it I had heard about him a few months ago? Wasn’t it a rumor that he was on General Ramsay’s staff? And the daughter — Noreen — whatever had become of her? There was an instant’s vision before me of laughing eyes, and wind-blown hair, a galloping horse, and the wave of a challenging hand. She had thus swept by me on the road as I took my mother southward.

“I don’t peer fer to recollect no such name, sah,” replied the negro, scratching his wool thoughtfully. “I done reckon as how you got the wrong house.”

"No, I reckon not," said the other drily. "Git 'long in, an' tell him Jem Taylor is yere."

The door opened wider.

"Suah, I know you now, sah. Just step right 'long in, the both of yer. I'll look after them horses. You'll fin' Massa Harwood in the dinin' room, sah."

I followed the mountaineer up the steps, and into the hall, utterly indifferent as to whether my company was desired or not. But Taylor paid no apparent heed to my presence. The interior was that of an old fashioned residence, which, as yet, had not suffered from the ravages of war. Evidences of neglect were numerous enough, yet the furniture remained intact, and the walls firm. The hall was carpeted, and the stairs leading upward were covered with a rug of brightly woven rags, yielding a touch of color. It was not yet dark, but a lamp burned on a near-by table, and a cheerful fire glowed at the farther end. A door standing open revealed what must have been the parlor, a seemingly large room in which hair-cloth chairs and sofas were dimly visible. But a brighter glow of light streamed from a room beyond, and Taylor, evidently acquainted with the house, walked directly forward, around the bulge of the stairs, and stepped within the open door. Determined to miss nothing, I was so close

behind, that my quick eyes caught what I believed to be a swift signal of warning to the man within. This, however, was an impression born from my own suspicion, rather than any real movement, for Taylor took but a single step across the threshold, and stopped, leaning on his gun. Behind him, standing in the open door, I had full glimpse of the interior.

There were two lights — one hanging above the table, the other on a sideboard to the right. The room itself was panelled in dark wood, the two windows heavily draped with hanging curtains, a few pictures decorating the walls. There was a fireplace, with a grate fire smouldering, and over it a pair of crossed swords and an old powder horn. The single occupant sat upright, before him the remnants of a light repast, his hand toying with a spoon, and his eyes shifting from Taylor's face to that of mine. He was heavily built and broad of shoulder, the face, illumined by the hanging lamp, strong and masterful, the jaw prominent, the forehead broad, the nose roman. It would have been a hard face, but for a gleam of good humor in the eyes, and the softening effect of gray hair, and a gray moustache. The man had aged greatly, yet I recognized him instantly, my heart throbbing with the possibility that I also might be remembered. Yet surely there was

no gleam of recollection in the eyes that surveyed me — and why should there be? I had been an uninteresting lad of fifteen when we last met. This knowledge gave me courage to meet that searching glance, and to lift my hand in the salute due to an officer of rank.

“ Ah! ” said Harwood in deep voice, “ a soldier from the valley? ”

“ Yes, sir,” respectfully, “ the Sixty-fifth Virginia.”

“ Oh, yes; there was a company of mountainmen from Covington way in that command. Daniels your captain? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Deserter? ”

“ No, sir; on thirty days’ furlough.”

“ Oh, indeed! so ‘ old Jack ’ thinks he has plenty of time, and can let part of his army go home, does he? Well, that’s his business, of course. How does it happen you wear artillery uniform? ”

Expecting the question I answered unhesitatingly.

“ They’d lost so many gunners, some of us were detailed to help. Recruits are coming in now.”

“ What was your battery? ”

“ Staunton Horse Artillery, sir.”

“ Stationed? ”

“ At Front Royal — that was our winter camp.”

He nodded, tapping his spoon against the table, favorably impressed by my prompt replies. His keen eyes sought the face of the silent mountaineer.

“You know this man, Taylor?”

“Wal, I can’t exactly say thet I dew, Major,” he said drawlingly, shifting his feet uneasily. “He wus sorter wished on me, an’ as he wus bound this way, I reckoned as how it wus best fer us to ride ’long together. He says he’s a Cowan, frum over on Buffalo Crick.”

“A Cowan! — you mean — ”

“No, he don’t claim ter be none o’ ol’ Ned’s brood — his mar’s a widder woman. They ain’t no kin, I reckon.”

Whatever thoughts might have been in Major Harwood’s mind were concealed by an impassive face, as he sat there for a moment in silence, gazing at the two of us.

“No doubt you did what you believed to be best, Taylor,” he said at last quietly. “We will talk it over later. You are both hungry enough to eat, I suppose? Draw up some chairs, and Sam will find something. No objection to remaining here over night, Cowan?”

“I’d be glad to get on, sir, but, my horse is about used up. The roads have been hard, and we have traveled rapidly.”

“Well, there is plenty of room, and you are welcome. This house,” he explained, “belongs to a friend of mine, who had to leave the country — too Yankee for his neighbors. I find it rather convenient at times. Ah, Sam, that rasher of bacon looks prime — I’ll try some myself.”

The three of us talked upon many subjects, although Taylor said little, except when directly addressed, and I noted that few references were made to the war. Occasionally Harwood would carelessly, interject a question relating to Jackson, but I remained ever on guard, exhibiting a lack of information such as was natural to a soldier in the ranks, and thus more and more disarmed suspicion. I apparently knew little beyond the disposition of my own battery, and the fact that the main camp was still at Front Royal, engaged in constant drills. In return I ventured to question my host on the condition of things in Green Briar, but made no attempt to learn the number of troops in the region. That Harwood was in the Federal service I had no doubt, although he was not in uniform, and, if this was true, then it must be also a fact that Taylor was a Union spy. The meeting here had not been by chance, although a mystery involved the hidden reason why I, a known Confederate soldier, had been encouraged to accompany the mountaineer to this

secret rendezvous. What could be Taylor's object in bringing me there to meet Harwood? Various theories flitted through my mind, as I sat there, endeavoring to carry on my share of conversation, but none wholly satisfied my judgment. At last the meal ended, and the Major pushed back his chair, and motioned for Sam to clear the table.

"You two men are tired out," he said genially, "and you had better turn in, and get a good night's sleep. We'll all of us ride on into Green Briar tomorrow. I'll talk with you a minute Taylor in the parlor before you go; but Cowan does not need to wait. Help yourselves to the tobacco. Oh, Sam!"

"Yes, Major."

"Show this soldier up to the back bedroom, and see he has everything he needs."

"Yes, sah."

It was clearly apparent that Harwood desired a private word with Taylor, and so, after deliberately filling my pipe, I rose to my feet, stretching sleepily. The black returned with a small lamp in his hand, and led the way up the broad stairs. My last backward glance through the open door revealed the two sitting just as I had left them, except that Harwood was leaning slightly forward across the table, and speaking earnestly. A moment later I

was left alone in a small room at the end of the upper hall. As the negro closed the door, clicking the latch into place, I glanced about me curiously. It was a narrow room, containing only a chair, a washstand and a single bed, a strip of rag carpet on the floor, and the one window so heavily curtained as probably to render the light invisible from without. I placed my bundle on the chair, and examined the door; it was securely latched, but there was no lock. Then I was not being held a prisoner. Still smoking I sat down on the edge of the bed, my mind busy with the situation.

It occurred to me now with new clearness of vision that Taylor had some special object in his friendliness. If he was a Union spy his natural preference would have been to travel alone. Instead, the fellow had almost insisted on my companionship; indeed, the taciturn, silent mountaineer had even endeavored to simulate geniality to that end. But for what possible reason? Suspicion no doubt of my real purpose — a vague questioning of my identity, the truth, of the story I had told. One thing was certain — I must break away from these men at once, or face exposure. Good fortune had been mine so far, for Major Harwood had failed to recognize me, but if Taylor believed evil of me his tale would certainly influence that officer, and arouse his sus-

picion likewise. If I could get safely away from the house that night, my escape unknown until morning, I might never encounter either of the two again. 'Twas likely Harwood had come from Charleston, where Ramsay was in command, and he would return there to make his report, while the mountaineer might be dispatched in any direction, but scarcely into the mountain districts of Green Briar, where my duty would take me. Nor would they waste much time in following me — for, at best, their suspicions must be vague, uncertain. Nothing had occurred to render them definite. I had said nothing, done nothing, which was inconsistent with the character I had assumed. They would most naturally suppose I was eager to get on, and preferred to complete the journey alone. No doubt they would dismiss the whole matter with a laugh when they discovered me gone.

I extinguished the light, and looked out of the window. It was quite a drop, though not necessarily a dangerous one, to the ground. Those dim outlines of buildings were probably the stables, where I would find my horse. With no guards the trick of getting away unobserved would be easy enough, and I knew the road sufficiently well to follow it safely. But I desired to learn first what these two men were actually up to. Such informa-

tion might prove more important than my investigations in Green Briar. I stole across to the door and opened it noiselessly, surprised to discover it had been left unguarded. Either the men below were careless, were innocent of wrong intent, or else were completely deceived as to my character and purpose. There was no one visible in the upper hall, and I leaned over the stair rail gazing down, and listening. A light still burned within the dining room, but there was no sound of voices, or of movement. I waited there motionless for several minutes, unable to assure myself that the conference of the two men had been terminated so quickly. Surely they must be there yet — where the lamp burned no doubt, and would resume conversation shortly.

The silence continued, and I began to cautiously steal passage down the carpeted stairs, crouching well back against the side-wall. Little by little I was able to peer in through the open door — the chairs were vacant; there was no one there. The gleam of the lamp revealed a deserted room, the table still littered with dishes. What had become then of Harwood and Taylor? Could they have gone to bed already? Surely I must have heard them if they had climbed the stairs. If not, had they ventured forth together on some secret mission into the night? or were they sitting beyond in the

darkened parlor? This last supposition was possible, and I must be fully assured that neither remained in the house, before I sought to trail them without. I crept to the half-closed door, and endeavored to gain glimpse within. The room was black and silent, although I could perceive dimly the outlines of furniture. Nothing appeared strange, except that the chair nearest the door had been overturned. Surely every article of furniture stood straight and stiff enough, when I glanced that way before, on my first entrance. I recalled clearly how rigid that parlor looked, every piece of furniture placed as if by mathematical lines.

Something — some vague sense of mystery, of danger, gripped me. I felt a strange choking in the throat, and reached for the revolver at my belt. It was not there; the leather holder was empty. My first sensation was fear, a belief I was the victim of treachery. Then it occurred to my mind that the weapon might have fallen from the open holster as I rested on the bed — a mere accident. At least I would learn the truth of that dark room. I stepped within, circled the overturned chair, and a groping foot encountered something lying on the floor. I bent down, and touched it with my hand; it was the body of a man. The whole truth came to me in a flash — there had been a quarrel, a murder,

unpremeditated probably, and the assassin had escaped. But which of the two was the victim? An instant I stood there, staring about in the dark, bewildered and uncertain. Then I grasped the lamp from the table in the other room, and returned holding the light in my hands. The form of Major Harwood lay extended on the floor, lifeless, his skull crushed by an ugly blow. Beside him lay a revolver, its butt blood-stained. Beyond doubt this was the weapon which had killed. I picked it up wonderingly — it was my own.

CHAPTER IV

INTO THE ENEMIES' HANDS



THE truth in all its ugliness came to me then in sudden revelation. This was no accident, no result of unpremeditated quarrel between the two men. Harwood's death had been deliberately planned, and the effort made to cast suspicion on me, while the murderer escaped. This was why Taylor had insisted on our traveling together so long. It accounted for many things which had puzzled me in the conduct of my companion. And the plot had been successful so far as Taylor knew. The Major lay dead, with my blood-stained revolver — evidently the weapon which had struck the blow — lying beside him. Dawn would reveal the deed, and I would be discovered alone in the house. Only my wakefulness, my desire to investigate, had interfered with the complete success of this hideous plan.

But why had Harwood been murdered? What purpose did his violent death serve? Who was Taylor? And what had brought him all that distance to do a deed like this? The two men were apparently friendly; there was a secret understanding

between them; they met in this lonely place by appointment. There could be no doubt as to that, for I had caught the swift sign of warning passing between them caused by my presence; and had felt the desire for my early retirement, so they might converse freely. Could it be possible some misunderstanding had arisen which had led to this tragedy? One fact alone combatted this thought — the stolen revolver; the evident purpose of the murderer to cast the burden of the crime on an innocent man. That was no impulse of the moment, no sudden inspiration. Taylor had prepared himself for this emergency, had deliberately taken the weapon for that very purpose. Where had the fellow gone? In which direction had he fled? A knowledge of this might help to clear up the mystery, might reveal, at least, whether he sought refuge with the Union or Confederate forces. And what had become of the negro?

All these questions flashed through my mind as I stood there, lamp in one hand and revolver in the other, staring down at the dead face. The first feeling of dazed bewilderment changed into anger, and a desire to revenge the death of this man who had once been my father's friend. I cared nothing at that moment for the uniform the Major had worn, that we were opposed to each other in arms; I

recalled merely the genial nature of the man, his acts of former friendship, and his motherless daughter. Out of the mist floated the face of the girl, the girl who had waved to me in the road. The vision brought back to me coolness, and determination. I wiped off the blood stains from the revolver on the carpet, and slipped the weapon back into my belt, assuring myself first that it remained loaded. Then I felt through the pockets of the dead man — if robbery had been the object of this crime, that robbery did not involve the taking of money. I found a knife, keys, and a roll of bills untouched, but not a scrap of paper. On the floor, partially concealed by one arm, was a large envelope, unaddressed, roughly torn open. It was some document, then, that the murderer sought. This once attained, his purpose had been accomplished, and he had fled with it in his possession. What paper could justify such a crime? The negro — perhaps the negro knew.

Intent now on my one purpose of discovery, my mind active and alert, I returned the lamp to the dining room table, and revolver still in hand began a rapid search of the house. The front door was fastened and barred, proving Taylor had not left that way. There was but one other room on that floor, a kitchen in considerable disorder, as though

the servant had made no effort to complete his work; but its outer door stood unlatched. The porch without was dark and deserted, yet through here, undoubtedly, the murderer had fled, seeking the stable and a horse. But what had become of the negro? Was he victim, or accomplice?

Satisfied now that Taylor had left the house, and escaped from the scene of his crime, I hastily searched the upper rooms, but found no trace of any other occupant. The servant was not there, nor had any bed, except my own, been occupied, or disarranged. Then Sam must have gone with the mountaineer in his hasty flight — must be equally guilty. This was the only conclusion possible, and the knowledge that I was left there alone rendered my own position more precarious. Harwood had mentioned no escort, yet surely he had never ventured into this doubtful region without having soldiers within call. No doubt they were quartered in the village, who, if he failed to appear when expected, would search for him. Before they came, and made discovery of the dead body, I must be safely beyond reach. If found there, no defense, no asseveration of innocence, would ever save me from condemnation. Their vengeance would be swift and merciless. Thinking now only of my own escape unobserved, I crept back down the stairs, my

nerves shaken, extinguished the lights, without even venturing to glance again into the dark parlor, and felt my way into the night without. It was sufficiently dark to compel me to feel passage cautiously over the uneven ground, the path, circling an old garden, leading toward the stable. Twice I stumbled over the remnants of a broken fence, and once I stepped blindly into a shallow trench, and dropped my bundle. The recovery of it brought me a new thought — this would be Federal territory; or if not, already, my night's ride would bring me well within their lines before dawn. My pass, my Confederate uniform, would only serve to increase the peril of possible capture. There might be those back yonder in Hot Springs who would recall our passage through the village, who would describe the artillery sergeant to Harwood's questioning cavalrymen. A change of clothing would throw them off the trail. I slipped instantly out of the soiled suit of gray, and donned the immaculate blue, buckling the belt about my waist, and securely hooking the saber. Then I scooped out a hole in the soft dirt, and buried the old uniform, tearing my pass into shreds, scattering the fragments broadcast. It was so lonely and still all about, not even a breath of wind stirring the leaves, that I felt a return of confidence, a renewed courage. The house behind me, and the

stable before, were mere outlines, scarcely discernible through the gloom. Yet I had only to follow the path, guided by the remains of a fence, to attain the latter. It was not a large building, and the path led directly to the single door, which stood wide open. I could hear the uneasy movements of a horse within, which was a great relief, as I had been fearful lest the fugitives had left me without a mount. Obligated to feel blindly in the dark, and not knowing what the black shadows might conceal, I was some time in leading the animal forth, properly saddled. But there was no alarm, no occurrence to unnerve me, and while there were three horses in the stable, I found it easy to choose my own. Once safely in the saddle, I circled the gloom of the house silently, and followed the roadway to the gate.

Not a light gleamed in any direction, and I could recall no other house near by. While it remained in view I could not remove my eyes from the mansion I had just left, or forget the dead body lying there in the dark. War had already taught me to look upon death by violence with a certain callousness. I had walked over battle fields, strewn with corpses, almost unmoved. But this was murder, foul and treacherous — the victim a man whom as a boy I had been taught to respect and revere. The shying of my horse at the gate alone caused me to note

the black something lying against the post. At first I deemed it a mere shadow, but the animal would not respond even to the spur, and I dismounted better to ascertain the cause of his fright. The negro lay there, dead as his master, a knife thrust in his heart. Then it was Taylor alone who had done the foul deed — and he had left no witnesses behind. Why had the fiend spared me in his bloody work? There could be but one reason — a thought in his cunning brain that I would be the one suspected — I, a helpless, unknown stranger, wearing the Confederate uniform, condemned by my own revolver lying beside the corpse — a hope that he would thus escape unfollowed. If he took such pains to cast suspicion on me, the man must have been aware that Major Harwood was not alone; that his death would be quickly discovered, and an effort made to avenge it.

There was nothing I could do, but flee swiftly through the night. My own position was now far too desperate to permit of my giving any alarm, or seeking to trace the murderer. To fall into Union hands would be my death-warrant, irrespective of Harwood's fate, and my duty lay in carrying out the orders of "Old Jack." To allow myself to be captured would spoil everything. Satisfied that the negro was indeed dead, I led my trembling horse past the motionless body, seeking as I did so to learn,

if possible, in which direction the murderer had disappeared. But in this I failed, the night being so dark there was no tracing of horse's hoofs on the hard roadway. I swung back into the saddle and turned to the left. I had no knowledge as to where this road — apparently not a main highway — led, but I was acquainted with the pike running west from Hot Springs. To venture back through that hamlet might, indeed, expose me to discovery, yet once beyond the village I should be traversing familiar ground, and could proceed with greater confidence. Besides, the hour was late; there was small chance that I would encounter any stray traveler, or find any pickets posted.

I rode toward the town as rapidly as I dared, watchful of every deepening shadow, until I came to the first straggling houses. These were dark and silent, and not so much as a dog barked as I walked my horse cautiously forward toward the main street. I saw but one dim light streaming out through an uncurtained window of what looked like a law office, and passed close enough to learn that a group of men within were playing cards. I could glimpse their shadows, but was unable to determine if any among them were in uniform. Yet few men were at home in those days, and it was highly probable these belonged to the Major's escort. I passed

the place unobserved, and rode on into the night, feeling I had escaped from immediate danger. At what I took to be the tavern corner I discovered the road leading to the left, and turned in that direction, assured that it would lead directly into the heart of Green Briar. At a little stream unbridged, I watered my horse, which drank greedily, and then climbed the opposite bank. The road ran through thick woods, the darkness intense, and as the way was silent and seemed deserted I gave the animal the spur.

I must have loped along thus for ten minutes, all thought of pursuit already dismissed, and my mind occupied with plans for the future, when the woods suddenly ended in a bare ridge, the ribbon of road revealing itself under the soft glow of the stars. I know not why I heard no sound of warning, but at the instant, a half dozen shadows loomed up blocking the path. I barely had time to rein in my horse before we were intermingled, the surprise evidently mutual, although one of the newcomers was swift enough to seize my animal's bit, and hold him plunging in fright. I clung to the stirrups, aware of the flash of a weapon in my face, and an oath uttered in a gruff voice.

"In God's name! where did you come from? Here, Snow, see what this fellow looks like."

The speaker had a wide brimmed hat, drawn low over his face, and a cape concealed his uniform. But Snow wore the cap of the Federal cavalry, and I knew I had fallen into Yankee hands.

CHAPTER V

I JOIN THE FEDERAL CAVALRY



SHOOK off the grip of the latter's hand from my arm.

“I have no objection to telling you my name and rank,” I said coldly, “but lower that gun first; I am in uniform.”

The rather contemptuous tone of voice employed had greater effect on the fellow than the evidence of his eyes. His arm fell to his side, although he still retained a grasp on my bridle.

“So I see,” but with no cordiality in the words. “But that is hardly convincing. Federal officers are rare birds who ride these roads alone. Who are you, sir, and why are you here?”

“Perhaps I may be privileged to ask first by what authority you halt and question me?”

He laughed, and waved the weapon he still held toward the others of his party.

“Our force alone is sufficient authority I should suppose. However I will set your mind at rest — I am Captain Fox, in command of a detachment of the Twelfth Pennsylvania Cavalry.”

"Oh, yes," I responded more pleasantly, "of General Ramsay's command. You had left Charleston before my arrival. You know Major Harwood, no doubt?"

"We are of his escort," both suspicion and command lost before my cool assurance. "You are in the service, sir?"

"Third United States Cavalry; on recruiting detail. I was to meet Harwood at Hot Springs, but was told he had gone to Green Briar."

"By whom?"

"A scout I met by chance; he gave the name Taylor."

The Captain swore grimly, glancing across my horse into the face of the trooper opposite.

"By all the gods, that's rather odd!" he exclaimed in apparent surprise. "That was the name of the man the Major expected to meet, wasn't it, Snow?"

"It was, sir."

"And he told you the Major had gone west to Green Briar? That isn't true, for this is the Green Briar road, and we have met no one. Were there no soldiers in Hot Springs?"

"I saw a group playing cards, but there were no sentries. The men had no knowledge of where Major Harwood had gone; only that he had left the village."

“Well, this stumps me!” his voice grown suddenly harder. “It doesn’t sound straight, for we left him safely in Hot Springs an hour before sundown, and he had no purpose at that time except to wait there for Taylor. Do you carry any papers?”

I drew the official envelope from my pocket, and held it out to him calmly. He opened the flap.

“A little light, Snow — yes, a match will do.”

The flame lit up their faces — the officer a thin-faced man with moustache and imperial, his teeth oddly prominent; the trooper older in years, but smooth-shaven, with deep-set eyes and square chin. Their uniforms were dusty and well worn. The others, clustered behind, remained mere shadows. The Captain took in the nature of the document at a glance, and I marked a change in his expression before the match went out.

“Oh, I see — you are Lieutenant Raymond. Got to us earlier than you expected. Find many recruits north?”

“No,” I answered, taken completely by surprise, but managing to control my voice. “That was why I thought I might accomplish more in this section. Those counties have been combed over.” I hesitated an instant, and yet it was best for me to learn what I could. “I was not aware, Captain, that my projected visit had been announced.”

He laughed, and the second match went out, leaving us again in darkness.

“Nor was it, officially; merely a friendly letter from an officer on Heitzelman’s staff to our Major, asking for you a friendly reception. Camp gossip brought the news to me. You knew Harwood?”

“No; only General Ramsay advised me to confer with him, because of his intimate knowledge of this section. He belonged, I believe, in Green Briar?”

“Yes, we were at his place yesterday; south of Lewisburg. What sort of a looking man was this fellow Taylor?”

I described him minutely, hoping for some recognition, but the Captain did not appear to recall any such character.

“We have only been in this region a few months,” he said, in explanation, “and I don’t remember any such chap. He is none of Ramsay’s scouts. What do you say, Snow?”

“Only man like that I’ve heard of, sir, is old Ned Cowan, and it ain’t likely he’s left the mountins to go into ‘Old Jack’s’ camp.”

Fox laughed, as though the idea amused him.

“Hardly. Cowan is too well known to take the risk. Either side would hang the hound on sight. Well, let’s ride along into Hot Springs. You’ll come with us, Lieutenant?”

There was no excuse left me, no reason that I could urge for riding on alone westward. Indeed, before I could clearly collect my thoughts, I was in the midst of the horsemen, slowly moving east once more over the dark road. Fox held position beside me, talking freely about his varied experiences since enlistment, and I only found it necessary to encourage him by interjecting an occasional brief reply. He was evidently fond of his own voice, and glad to find a new auditor. His reminiscences had little reference to matters of interest to me, and my own thoughts were of the present situation, although I listened to his droning, and was ready to respond. I must find some means for parting company with these friendly cavalrymen, before they discovered the fate of Harwood. That was my first inclination; then it occurred to me that possibly I could attain my end more easily by making use of their protection. Why not? Neither Fox, nor any of his men, had slightest reason to question my identity. They would never connect me with the death of the Major, and, beyond doubt, they would immediately follow any trail the murderer left. If he went east or south the pursuers would never dare venture more than a few miles, for there were Confederates stationed in some force at Covington, but if Taylor, by chance, had turned west in his flight, the pursuit

would take me into the very section to which I had been assigned. And if it proved this man Taylor was in reality old Ned Cowan, that was where he would naturally go — to his own people among the mountains of Green Briar. The knowledge that the real Raymond was actually expected to arrive in western Virginia complicated affairs greatly, and added to my peril. But it made my present position easier, and there might be ample time for me to carry out my plans before his appearance on the scene. Anyhow I had small chance to choose at present, and could only drift as fate ordained.

Riding as rapidly as the darkness made possible, we clattered into the deserted street at Hot Springs, and Fox cursed vigorously the negligent guard. The sergeant knew little of where Major Harwood had gone, as he had given no orders, and not even intimated the probable time of his return. When last seen he was riding out the south road accompanied only by his servant. That was late in the afternoon, and the sergeant supposed they were merely exercising the horses. Yes, there were two men who passed through the village about dusk, an old mountaineer, and a young fellow in Confederate uniform. He didn't know where they went, as he was asleep at the time, and Corporal Green, and most of the squad, were fishing in the creek. The blacksmith told him

about them, and said they were both on horseback, and had taken the south road. No, he hadn't given the matter any further thought. Fox swore again, and ordered the men into saddle, and we swung out at a sharp trot along the dirt pike. I rode next him, but the Captain was in such rage I kept silent, knowing well the tragic discovery soon to be revealed. The gray dawn began to steal about us, making objects near at hand visible, and revealing the tired faces of the cavalrymen. There was sufficient light to enable us to perceive the gloomy house in the oak grove, and the motionless form lying beside the gate. Fox drew up his horse with a jerk, and leaned forward staring.

"My God, men!" he exclaimed, choking. "That's Harwood's nigger. Turn the body over, Green — ah! the poor devil was knifed. Here, a half dozen of you, unsling carbines, and follow me — there's been dirty work done. Sergeant, don't let your men destroy those hoof-prints in the road. Lively now, lads!"

I advanced with them up the driveway, fearful that if I held back, it might later be commented upon. The front door refused admittance, but we entered from the rear. Everything within was exactly as I had left it, and in the parlor, still dark because of closed blinds, lay the lifeless body of

Harwood. Fox fell upon his knees beside the motionless form, ordering the windows thrown open, his hands touching the lifeless flesh.

"Dead for hours," he exclaimed in a tone of horror, turning his gaze upon me. "Struck from behind — see, Raymond. What in God's name can this mean?"

He began searching the pockets.

"Not robbery — for here is money, and a watch. But the papers are gone, every scrap of them." He looked about at the men. "The Major had his papers with him, did he not, Chambers?"

"Yes, sir," and the young, boyish soldier addressed straightened up. "I was with him when he put on citizen's clothes, and he slipped a big buff packet into his pocket."

Fox's bewildered glance met mine.

"Do you know what that packet contained, Captain?" I questioned.

"Only that it was entrusted to his care by General Ramsay, and its destination was the army on the Potomac."

"To be forwarded by this man Taylor?"

"I do not know. Harwood expected to meet Taylor here at Hot Springs, but I think there were others to be here also. The Major kept his own counsel, but something I overheard caused me to

believe his engagement with Taylor was of a more private nature. Chambers was his clerk, perhaps he knows."

The lad shook his head, his eyes on the dead man.

"I'm certain those papers were not meant for him, sir," he answered slowly. "They were to be given to a scout named Dailey. It was some other business that brought the Major here all alone — but he never told me."

There was nothing further to be discovered, and Fox realized the necessity of haste. His orders were prompt. Four men were detailed to bury the body, and then rejoin the column as soon as possible. The others were marched back to the gate, and remounted. Taylor had apparently made no effort to conceal his trail, the hoof-prints of his horse showing clearly now daylight had returned. He had ridden south at a sharp trot, and Fox, satisfied as to this fact, ordered his men forward. The gait at which we rode rendered conversation impossible, although my horse easily kept stride beside the Captain. More and more clearly the strangeness of my position was borne in upon my mind — here I was in Federal uniform, in a column of blue-clad cavalry, riding desperately in pursuit of a fugitive. It was all a series of strange accidents, and I could not figure out how I was to extricate myself from the

position I had been compelled to assume. I had been accepted without question, and there was no excuse I could urge for escape. And how would I better my condition if I discovered one? If Taylor was a Confederate he would head directly for Covington, and, as soon as this was determined, this little squad of troopers would abandon pursuit. He had several hours start, and it would be foolhardy to attempt to overhaul the fellow. But if the man turned west — and surely there must be a crossroad below — Fox would keep on indefinitely. The Captain was of bulldog breed, if I was any judge of character, and his one thought now was the capture of Harwood's murderer. Such a course would bring us into the very heart of Green Briar, where my connection with this squad of troopers would serve me well.

It was an hour later when we came suddenly to the fork, the south branch leading over a long clay hill, the west along a rocky ridge. Fox sprang to the ground, and followed the faint prints of the horse we were pursuing for a hundred yards on foot. Some cattle had passed southward, but there was a defect in the shoe of the animal Taylor rode clearly revealed in the clay. The Captain came back, a grim smile on his lips.

"The cuss was no Johnny Reb," he said shortly.

“That was what I was afraid of, but now I know what to do. We’ll save our horses, men, for this is going to be a long ride — that murdering devil is headed for the Green Briar. This is the lower Lewisburg road.” He swung up into saddle. “Green, take three men ahead with you, and keep half a mile in advance. Watch out carefully, for there may be graybacks along here. Going with us, Lieutenant?”

“About the best thing I can do,” I replied readily, “my orders were for Green Briar and Fayette.”

“All right, then, but they had small respect for your life when they sent you in there. From all I hear it is like a menagerie of wild animals broken loose — good fighting anywhere. Only trouble will be there is so much at home there will be no need for the boys to enlist. However that’s your affair, not mine.” His eyes surveyed his men keenly. “Loosen carbines! Forward march! Trot!”

Silently, save for the jingle of accoutrements, and the thud of horses’ feet, we rode westward, sunlight flecking the dusty uniforms. The pike dipped down into a hollow, and, climbing the hill beyond, appeared the figures of the four scouts. Far away was the haze of the mountains.

CHAPTER VI

THE NIGHT ATTACK



THE incidents of that ride do not remain with me in any special clearness of detail. In fact it was comparatively uneventful, the road apparently little used at any time, and now absolutely deserted except for our party. In all probability the fugitive had chosen it for this very reason, aware of its loneliness. Taylor also must have held in contempt any possible pursuit, as he made no attempt at concealing his trail. We followed as rapidly as the condition of our horses would warrant, but we were soon aware that the murderer was steadily increasing the distance between. The man evidently knew the country, and had friends. There were few houses visible, and these were completely deserted on our arrival, yet at some of them the fugitive must have found food, and at one a fresh mount. We marked where the old horse, with the broken shoe identifying it, had been led aside into the bushes, and then the hoof-prints of another animal, of longer stride, appeared in the dirt road. The trail of the discarded

horse led along the bank of a rocky creek, and disappeared utterly within a deep ravine. The print of a bare foot seemed to tell the tale of a boy at the bridle rein.

We rode steadily, keeping well together, conscious that in all probability we were watched by hostile eyes, peering out from behind rock and thicket. The road became rougher, more difficult to travel. There were paths, dim, shadowed by brush, leading off occasionally on either side — possibly to some cabin, and little clearing, hidden and obscure. We foraged through deserted shacks, finding poor reward, yet managed to subsist, although with hunger unsatisfied. The men grumbled, and Fox swore, as all alike realized the uselessness of attempting to overhaul the fleeing man. The impotent pursuit was a joke to him, already safe in the foothills, and guarded from surprise. Long before night came the captain comprehended the fact that we were on a fool's errand; that his little squad was being lured deeper and deeper into a hostile country, but no opportunity to turn aside presented itself. To return would only bring us closer to the Confederate lines at Covington, and we found no road leading northward. Fox's field map pictured one, however, close at hand, and in the hope of attaining this before darkness finally set in, we pressed the wearied horses desperately. The

night overtook us in midst of a mountain solitude. The scouts had discovered a spring at the bottom of a rocky hollow, and there Fox reluctantly ordered camp to be made, the horses finding scant pasturage beyond. The night was chill, but there was nothing to cook, and no fires were lighted, the men munching at whatever they had in their haversacks, and endeavoring to extract some warmth from their thin blankets. The grumbling and cursing soon ceased, however, and those not on duty slept fitfully. I made the round of the sentries with Fox, slipping and stumbling over the rough way, through the darkness, until we again found refuge beside the spring. The night was black and still. We could hear the restless movements of the horses, the mournful cry of some wild bird. The captain was but a dim shadow barely outlined in the gloom.

"This weird place gets on the nerves," he said, as if half ashamed of the confession. "Do you know, Raymond, I have felt for the last hour as if we were riding into some trap." He glanced nervously behind him. "I don't believe there has ever been a Federal detachment down as far as this before. We're in old Ned Cowan's country."

"Confederate?" I asked, interested at once by the name.

"Heaven knows! To the best of my belief the

fellow doesn't give a whoop for either side. He's just a natural born devil, and this war gave him a chance to get the hell out of his system. If half the stories told about him are true he is a fiend for cruelty, ready enough to fight either side if they interfere; still, I guess, he calls himself a Reb."

"And his followers?"

"A motley crew of mountain men mostly, scattered all through here, together with a bunch of deserters and conscripts from both sides who have naturally drifted to him. Nobody knows how big a band he has, but it would take an army to run them out of these mountains. We had orders to do it — but piffle! Ramsay came down as far as Fayette Court House with a regiment of infantry, and a cavalry guard, and sent out a flag of truce asking the old devil to come in and talk with him. He actually did come; rode right up to headquarters, with a dozen of his ragged followers, heard what Ramsay had to say, and then simply told the general to go to hell, and rode off again."

"Were you there? did you see the men?"

"No, but the sergeant did; he was detailed at that time as headquarters' orderly."

"Yes," I said, determined on my course, "I was talking with Hayden during the noon halt. He described Cowan to me, and I believe he is the same

man I encountered at Hot Springs, Captain Fox — the fellow Taylor we are in pursuit of.”

The captain stared into the black night, silent for several minutes.

“I’ve been suspecting the same thing for the last three hours,” he admitted at last slowly, “and that he hoped we would follow him. The fellow hasn’t ridden fast, and has purposely left a plain trail. More than that he was expected along this road, and there were relays of horses waiting. He only changed once, but he was met by another party near that ruined mill. Ever since then I have felt that we were being watched by unseen eyes. Did you observe the curl of smoke to our right just before dark — how it rose and fell in rings?”

“I saw the smoke, yes — a thin spiral, but supposed it to be from the chimney of some mountain shack.”

“Well, it was not. That was an outside fire, and the smoke was smothered, and then thrown up by blankets. That is their way of signaling. I tell you, Lieutenant, this murder of Harwood is more than an army matter. It was either the culmination of a feud — done for personal revenge; or else the Major had papers in his possession bearing on the situation here that could only be gained over his dead body. The man who killed him was old Ned Cowan.”

"But Harwood must have known him," I protested.

"Of course he did; they were neighbors before the war, and met there by appointment. For all I know the Major may have had some confidential communication from the War Department. God knows, what it was. All I am sure about is that I would give a good deal to be out of this fix right now, and twenty miles to the north of here."

We sat there for half an hour, discussing the matter, and endeavoring to convince ourselves the danger was less than we imagined. There was nothing to be done but wait for daylight. We could not possibly proceed through that darkness, along the unknown mountain road. We would be safer where we were, quietly hidden away in this cleft of the rocks. Finally Fox crept forth again to make another round of the pickets, to assure himself they were alert, and I lay down in a little hollow, and rolled up in my blanket. Above me I could see but one star peering through a rift of cloud, and, except for the heavy breathing of the men, and their restless turning, there was scarcely a sound. Even the wind had ceased to rattle the dead leaves. The very silence seemed a pledge of safety, and, before the Captain returned, I had fallen asleep.

The chill of the night awoke me, cold and shiver-

ing. The wind had arisen, and swept down the funnel in which I lay, with an icy breath against which my single blanket afforded no protection. I must get back against the rock, wherever I could find shelter. Gripping the blanket in one hand, I crept quietly up the gully, possibly a distance of fifty feet before encountering the rock wall. I felt my way blindly, and groped about until I discovered a few tufts of grass on which to lie down, but these proved so scant as to yield little comfort, and I tossed about, every bone aching, unable to lose consciousness. There was no sign of dawn in the sky, nor could I see the face of my watch to determine the hour. The man who had been lying next me, however, was gone, and so there must have been a change of guard while I slept. I could distinguish, dimly outlined against the sky, the overhanging rock-wall which enclosed our camp, and the deeper shade of a cleft a yard or two to my left, where the dead trunk of a tree stood like a gaunt, ugly sentinel. Even as I lay staring the figure of a man slipped out from behind its protection, and, dropping on hands and knees, crept forward across the open space. Another and another followed, mere ghost-like shadows, scarcely appearing real. They were within two yards of me, but their appearance, their passing was so swift and silent, as to leave me dazed and mystified. For the

instant I doubted my eyesight, imagined I dreamed. Then, before I could raise voice in alarm, a rifle spat viciously, the red flame of its discharge cleaving the night. A fusillade followed, and in the flare I caught grotesque glimpses of men leaping forward, and there was a confused yelling of voices, a din of noise.

I was upon my knees, revolver in hand, but in the melee below could not distinguish friend from foe — alike they were a blur of figures, one instant visible, the next obscured. Yet there could be no doubt as to the final ending of the struggle. Taken by surprise, outnumbered, the little squad of troopers would be crushed, annihilated. Nor was there reason why I should sacrifice myself in their defense — a valueless sacrifice. My choice was instantly made, as there flashed to my mind what my fate would be if I ever fell into Cowan's hands attired in Federal uniform. On hands and knees I crept to the cleft in the rock wall, and began to clamber up over the irregular rocks. It was not likely any guards had been left behind when the mountaineers descended, and I must be beyond sound before the din of fighting ceased. It was a steep climb, dangerous no doubt in the dark, yet I was desperate enough to give this peril scarcely a thought. The shouts and yells, the cries for mercy, the sound of blows, grew fainter and finally ceased altogether. Leaning back, and

looking down, I could perceive nothing in the black void. A voice shouted an order, but it sounded far off, and indistinct. I was in a narrow gully, the incline less steep than amid the rocks below, and could perceive the lighter canopy of the sky not far above me. As I crept out into the open space, someone touched match to a pile of dry limbs in the cove below, and the red flames leaped high, revealing the scene. I caught a glimpse of it — staring down as though I clung at the mouth of hell, seeing moving black figures, and the dark, motionless shadows of dead men. The one glimpse was enough, the fearful tragedy of it smiting me like a blow, and I turned and ran, stumbling over the rough ground, my only thought that of escape.

There were stars in the sky, their dim light sufficient to yield some faint guidance. It occurred to me, even in the terror of my flight, that the attacking party doubtless had horses tethered somewhere to the left. Yet they would be under guard, and I dare not seek them. My course led me close beside the edge of the ridge; I could see the reflection of the fire below on the opposite hillside, but I soon left this behind, and plunged thankfully forward into the concealing shadow of a wood. Here the ground fell away to the banks of a shallow stream, and some instinct of woodcraft led me to wade down with its

current for a considerable distance, until the icy water drove me to the bank once more. I was wet and cold, shivering with the chill of the air, although my cavalry boots had kept my feet dry. I knew I had covered several miles, and must be beyond pursuit and safe from discovery. The spot wherein I found myself was the dry bed of a creek, overhung by bushes, its rocks strewn with dry fragments of wood washed down by some past freshet. No longer obsessed by fear of being pursued, I gathered an armful and set them ablaze, lying as close as possible to the flame until the grateful warmth brought new courage and hope. I remained there until dawn, the first gray light giving assurance that my flight had been to the north along the foothills. From the ridge top a wide vista lay revealed of rough, seemingly uninhabited country, growing more distinct as the light strengthened. There was no house visible, no sign of any road; all about extended a rude mountain solitude, but to the northwest there was a perceptible break in the chain of hills, as though a pass led down into the concealed valley beyond. With this for guidance I plunged forward, eager to get out of that drear wilderness.

CHAPTER VII

SHELTER FROM THE STORM



T WAS a hard tramp, the notch in the hills farther away than I had reckoned upon, and the ground between extremely difficult to travel over. At times an impenetrable tangle of brush turned me aside, and I was obliged to skirt numerous ravines which were impassable. Yet I held stubbornly to the course, seeing no other way out from the tangle, and stumbled steadily forward, my body aching from fatigue, and growing weak from hunger. It was considerably after the noon hour before I came upon the first sign of human life — an old logging road. Weed overgrown, and evidently long abandoned, it was nevertheless a most welcome discovery, and I limped on between its ruts, animated by new hope. The weather had turned colder, and there were whirling flakes of snow in the air. The direction I traveled compelled me to face the storm, and the wind whipped my face cruelly. An hour more of struggle brought me suddenly on a dismal shack of logs in the midst of a small clearing. I hesitated at the edge of

the wood, peering through the snow. The scene was a desolate one, the clearing overgrown with weeds, the hut barely fit for habitation. Yet the very desperation of my situation compelled me to chance its occupancy, and I pushed a way forward through the weeds, discovering no path, until I attained the door. It was closed, but unfastened, and, revolver in hand, I opened it softly and stepped within. There was but one room, and that bare, except for an empty box or two, and a few discarded garments hanging from pegs against the wall. A gun with broken lock stood in one corner beside an axe, and a rudely constructed fireplace occupied one end. There was no other entrance, and the single window was securely closed. The light streaming in through the door revealed these details, and that the room was unoccupied. Yet someone had been there, and not so very long ago, for there were scraps of food on one of the overturned boxes, and a faint, barely perceptible curl of smoke arose from the black ashes on the hearth.

Whoever the former occupant might be, or where he had gone, was of small moment to me just then. It was enough to be assured that he had departed. The sight of those food fragments renewed my consciousness of hunger, revived my sense of chilly discomfort. I glanced without into the storm and

closed the door, changing the interior into twilight gloom. Using the axe I soon had a cheerful fire going, and as the warmth of the flame became perceptible, began eager search for something to eat. I almost despaired of success in this effort, but by chance pushing aside one of the garments on the side wall, discovered a haversack in which remained some hard bread and a bit of home-smoked bacon. Unappetizing as these appeared, I sat down before the fire and ate heartily. I dared not sleep, and indeed felt little inclination to do so, my mind busy with recollections of the night's adventures, and planning my future course of action. I thought of Fox, and his men, wondering who among them all had fallen during the fight, and what might be the fate of the others. It was Cowan, no doubt, and his mountaineers, who had attacked, and there would be little mercy shown. This hut likely was the abode of one of the gang, and I gazed about in renewed disgust. It would be well for me to be away before the owner returned, yet I lingered, seduced by the warmth of the fire, and dreading the storm without. The fellow would not come back probably until the snow ceased. Nor did I in the least know where I was to go — except that I must push along to the north, out of Cowan's country. Once in the neighborhood of Lewisburg, I would be on more familiar

ground, and could proceed with the work assigned me. If there were Federal troops there I would boldly report the fate of Fox's detachment, proclaim my own purpose as a recruiting officer, and request protection. My papers, my intimacy with Captain Fox, and the knowledge throughout the district that a Lieutenant Raymond had been detailed to this service, would disarm all suspicion. And in my judgment Lewisburg was in that valley ahead — might indeed be visible at the other end of the gap.

I got to my feet, somewhat reluctantly, and opened the door. The storm had ceased, but the ground was white, and the wind still whipped the snow viciously. There was no excuse, however, for not going forward, and closing the door securely behind me I ploughed through the tangle of weeds back to the road. A hundred yards below I came to a pike, along which a wagon had passed since the fall of snow. The vehicle had been drawn by mules, and their narrow hoof marks pointed to the valley. I followed cautiously, making no effort to overtake the outfit, and thus, just before sundown, emerged from the narrow gap and looked down into the broad valley of the Green Briar. It was a scene to linger in the memory, and at my first glance I knew where I was, recognizing the familiar objects outspread before me. The road led downward, turning and

twisting as it sought the easier grades, and, no longer obscured by snow, the soil showed red and yellow. The wagon was already nearly to the bottom of the hill, distinguished by its spread of dirty canvas top. Other than this I could perceive no moving object, except what appeared to be either a body of horsemen, or bunch of cattle, far away to the left. Lewisburg lay beyond a spur of the hills, invisible from my position, although distant spirals of smoke indicated its presence. A few log huts appeared along the curving road, the one nearest me in ruins, while a gaunt chimney beside a broad stream unbridged was all that remained of a former mill. Beyond this, in midst of a grove of noble trees, a large house, painted white, was the only conspicuous feature in the landscape. I recognized it at once as the residence of Major Harwood.

My gaze rested upon it, as memory of the man, and his fate, surged freshly back into mind. The place had been spared destruction; it remained unchanged — but from that distance there was nothing to indicate that the house was still occupied. It had the appearance of desertion — no smoke showing above the broad chimney, no figures moving either about the main house, or the negro cabins at the rear. This condition was no particular surprise, for Harwood's daughter, scarcely more than a girl

to my remembrance, would not likely remain there isolated and alone during such troublesome times, and the servants had doubtless long since disappeared in search of freedom. The young woman would doubtless be with friends, either in Lewisburg or Charleston; and that the mansion, thus deserted, still remained undestroyed was, after all, not so strange, for the Major's standing throughout that section would protect his property. He would retain friends on each side of the warring factions who would prevent wanton destruction. I moved on down the steep descent, losing sight of the house as the road twisted about the hill, although memory of it did not desert my mind. Some odd inclination seemed to impel me to turn aside and study the situation there more closely. Possibly some key to the mystery of Harwood's murder — some connection between him and old Ned Cowan — might be revealed in a search of the deserted home. Fox had said that his party halted at the house on their march east toward Hot Springs. Some scrap of paper might have been left behind in the hurry of departure, which would yield me a clue. If not this, then there might be other papers stored there relating to military affairs in this section of value to the Confederacy. Harwood was the undoubted leader of the Union sympathizers throughout the entire

region; he would have lists of names, and memoranda of meetings, containing information which would help me greatly in my quest. An exploration could not be a matter of any great danger, and might yield me the very knowledge I sought.

I had almost determined on this course when I came to the cross-road, which I knew ran directly in front of the house. It was already growing dark, clouds hanging low over the valley, and, as I paused irresolute, a cold drizzle set in, the north wind sweeping the dampness into my face. Determined by this I turned aside into the new road, and pressed forward, only anxious now to find shelter. The road twisted about along the bank of a small stream shadowed by trees on either side. I passed the ruins of the mill, but beyond the night closed about me so dark that objects became shapeless, and I even found difficulty in following the path, although it was seemingly a well traveled road. Only detached sections of rail fence remained standing, and I should have stumbled blindly past the very place I sought but for the high stone pillars which marked the place where the gate had once been. These guided me to the driveway, and I groped a passage through the grove of trees to the front steps.

The great house loomed before me black and silent. If I had ever questioned its desertion its

appearance lulled every such suspicion. Nor had it escaped unscathed from the despoilation of war. At a distance, gazing from the side of the mountain, I could perceive no change. But now, close at hand, even the intense darkness could not hide the scars left by vandals. The front steps were broken, splintered as if by an axe, and the supporting pillars of the wide veranda had been hacked and gashed. The door above was tightly closed, yet both the windows to the right were smashed in, sash and all, leaving a wide opening. I crept forward, and endeavored to peer through, but the darkness within was opaque. The only sound was the beating of rain on the roof overhead. Occasionally the swirl of the wind drove the cold drops against me where I crouched listening; I was wet through, chilled to the bone, my uniform clinging to me like soaked paper. At least the inside promised shelter from the storm, a chance for a fire, and possibly fragments of food. And I had nothing to fear but darkness.

My revolver was under the flap of my cavalry jacket, dry and ready for use. I brought it forward, within easy grip, and stepped over the sill. My feet touched carpet, littered with broken glass, and I felt about cautiously, locating an overturned chair, and a cushioned settee, minus one leg. My recollection of the interior of the house was vague and indistinct

— the remembrance only of one brief visit made there years before, a boy of ten with my father. I had never been in this room, which must be the parlor, but I knew a wide hallway led straight through from front door to back, bisected only by a broad stairway leading to the upper story. The library would be opposite directly across the hall, and the dining room behind that. I had been in both these apartments, and they had seemed to me then spacious and wonderful; quite the most remarkable rooms I had ever seen. I groped along the inside wall, seeking the door, making no particular effort to be noiseless, yet rendered cautious by fear of stumbling over misplaced furniture. The apartment was evidently in much disorder, glass crackling under my feet, and a breadth of thick carpet torn up, so that I tripped over it, and nearly fell. Yet I found the door at last, standing wide open, and emerged into the hall. The way was clearer here, and there came into my mind the recollection of a bracket lamp, on the wall at the foot of the stairs. Perhaps it was there still, and might contain oil. If this could be located, a light would be of great assistance, and could not add very much to my peril of discovery. No one would be abroad in this desolate country on such a night of storm, and the house was utterly abandoned. Besides, the heavy blinds at most of the windows were closed

tightly. My remembrance of the position of the lamp was extremely vague, yet my fingers found it at last, and lifted it from the bracket. The globe contained oil, and, in another moment, the light revealed my immediate surroundings.

Except for a broken stair rail the hall remained in good order, a storm-coat hanging beside the front door, and a serving table and low rocker occupying the recess behind the stairway. I could see nearly to the further end, where a bench stood against the wall with some garment flung over it, and up the stairs to the blackness of the second story. The total desertion of the place was evident; the destruction which had been wrought was plainly the work of cowardly vandals, who had broken in after the Harwoods left. Convinced of this truth I proceeded fearlessly to explore, seeking merely the warmth of a fire and food. The library, a large room, the walls lined with bookcases, afforded no encouragement, but I stopped in amazement at the door of the dining room — the light of my lamp revealing a table at which someone had lately eaten, apparently alone. There was a single plate, a cup and saucer, a half loaf of bread, with a slice cut, part of a ham bone, with considerable meat remaining untouched, and a small china teapot. For an instant the unexpected sight of these articles fascinated me, and then my

eyes caught a dull glow in the fireplace at the opposite end of the room — the red gleam of a live ember.

I could not actually credit the evidence of my own eyes, firmly believing, for an instant, the glow was but the reflection of the light held in my hands. Yet a step forward convinced me — the ashes of the fireplace radiated warmth; someone then had been in that very room within an hour, had warmed himself there, and partaken of food. The shock of this discovery was so sudden as to give me a strange, haunted feeling. The house had seemed so completely deserted, so desolate, wrapped in silence and darkness, that the very conception that someone else was hiding there came upon me like a blow. Who could the person be? A faithful slave remaining to guard the property for his master? Some fugitive who, like myself, had sought shelter from the storm? Or Old Ned Cowan seeking to complete his mysterious purpose? Could this be the aftermath of the murder? A search after papers not found upon the body of the dead man? Somehow my mind settled to this theory, leaped to this conclusion — the prowler was Cowan, or else some emissary he had sent. Well, I would find out. Thus far the advantage was mine, for I knew of another presence, while the fellow, whoever he might prove to be, in all

probability possessed no knowledge of my entrance. Perhaps he had already completed his search and departed; if not, then he must be somewhere on the second floor, for if below he would have certainly perceived my light or been alarmed by the sound of my movements.

My heart beat fast, but from excitement, not fear. With cocked revolver in one hand, the lamp in the other, I silently opened door after door, peering into vacant apartments, half thinking every shadow to be a skulking figure. The search revealed nothing; not even further evidence of any presence in the house. The kitchen fire was cold, the cooking utensils clean, and in their proper places. The back door was bolted from within, the windows securely closed. I listened for any sound, but the house was as silent as a tomb; I could hear the patter of rain, the scraping of a limb against the outer wall, but not the faintest movement within. Satisfied already that the mysterious invader had departed, yet sternly determined now to explore the whole house, and have done with the business, I mounted the back stairway, a strip of rag carpet rendering my steps silent, and, with head above the landing, flashed my light cautiously along the upper hall. There were doors on either side, the most of them open, but the third to the left was closed. There was no transom over it, but the door

was far enough away from the radius of my lamp so as to reveal a faint glow of light at the floor line. I sat the lamp down on the landing, and crept noiselessly forward to assure myself; it was true, a light was burning within the closed room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE



HERE was no keyhole through which I could peer, and the opening above the floor was the merest crack. I stood with ear pressed against the panel, fingers gripping the butt of my revolver. Not a movement within could be distinguished. What might be the meaning of all this? What would I encounter when I dashed that door open, and faced the occupant of the room? Who could the fellow possibly be? For what purpose should he shut himself up here alone? Two answers to this last query occurred to me — he might be asleep; or, if by any chance this had been the Major's room, he might be busy rifling his desk. But there was no rustle of papers, no movement of any kind. I stood there for what seemed to me a long while, listening vainly for any sound which would indicate life within, the conviction constantly growing on me that the man slept. An ordinary latch held the door closed, and I pressed this, opening the barrier slightly. The movement made not the slightest noise, and gave me a glimpse within.

A narrow bed, unoccupied, undisturbed, its coverlet white and unwrinkled, stood against the wall. At the foot a small stand held a few books, and above this hung the picture of a gray-haired woman. This was all the view the narrow opening revealed, but served to render me even more cautious — the occupant was not lying down.

Yet I could not stop then; could not safely retreat. Even if someone sat there, hidden from view, patiently waiting to gain glimpse of me to kill, I must go on and discover the truth. My revolver was at the crack, ready, and my left hand slowly opened the door wider. Now I could see the opposite wall, and the space between, and I stood there motionless, breathless, yet feeling my very flesh quiver at the unexpected revealment. In front of a small grate fire, her back toward me, snuggled comfortably down in the depths of an easy chair, sat a woman, reading. I could see little of her because of the high back of the chair rising between us — only a mass of dark brown hair, a smooth, rounded cheek, and the small white hand resting on the chair arm. I knew vaguely her waist was white, her skirt gray, and I saw the glimmer of a pearl-handled pistol lying on a closed chest at her side. Still she was only a woman, a mere girl apparently, whom I had no cause to fear. The sudden reaction caused me to



The book fell to the floor, her hand gripping the pistol

smile with relief, and to return my revolver silently to the belt. Her eyes remained on the page of the book. I think I would have withdrawn without a word, but, at that instant, a draft from the open door flickered her light, and she glanced about seeking the cause. I caught the startled expression in her eyes as she first perceived my shadow; the book fell to the floor, her hand gripping the pistol, even as she arose hastily to her feet. The light was on her face, and I knew her to be Noreen Harwood.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" she asked tersely, a tremor in the voice, but no shrinking in those eyes that looked straight at me.

I moved forward from out of the shadow into the radius of light. It was only a step, but the girl recoiled slightly, the pearl-handled pistol rising instantly to a level with my eyes.

"Stand where you are!" she ordered. "What are you doing, creeping about this house in the dark?"

"Not in the dark exactly," I answered, seeking to relieve the strain, and holding my hat in one hand, as I bowed gravely, "for my lamp is on the stairs."

I marked the quick change of expression in her eyes as they swept over me. There was no evidence of recognition; scarcely more than a faint acknowledgment that my appearance was not entirely unfavor-

able. Yet surely that alone was all I could hope for. Except for that one chance encounter on the road we had never met since we were children, and she would not likely associate the son of Judge Wyatt with the man now confronting her, attired in the wet and muddy uniform of a Federal Lieutenant. Indeed it was better she should not; and a feeling of relief swept over me as I realized her failure to connect me with the past. No memory of my features found expression in her face, as her eyes fell from mine to the clothes I wore.

“You are Union? an officer of — of cavalry? I — I can scarcely comprehend why you should be here.” Her attitude no longer threatening, the gleaming pistol lowered. “There are Federal troops at Lewisburg, but — but I do not recall your face.”

“My being here is wholly an accident,” I explained quietly. “I supposed the house deserted, and sought entrance to get away from the storm. There was a broken window — ”

“Yes,” she interrupted, her eyes again on mine questioningly. “I found that when I came; someone had broken in.”

“Robbery, no doubt.”

“I am not sure as to that. I have found nothing of any value missing. Indeed we left nothing here to attract vandals.” She hesitated, as though doubt-

ful of the propriety of further explanation to a stranger. "I — I belong here," she added simply. "This is my home."

"Yes; I supposed as much; you are Miss Noreen Harwood?"

Her blue eyes widened, her hand grasping more tightly the back of the chair.

"Yes," she admitted. "You knew my father?"

"Slightly; enough to be aware of the existence of his daughter, and that this was his plantation."

"Then you must be connected with the garrison at Charleston?"

"No, Miss Harwood; I belong to the Army of the Potomac, and am here only on recruiting service. A word of explanation will make the situation clear, and I trust may serve to win your confidence. I do not have the appearance of a villain, do I?"

"No, or I should not remain parleying with you," she responded gravely. "The war has taught even the women of this section the lesson of self-protection. I am not at all afraid, or I should not be here alone."

"It surprises me, however, that Major Harwood should consent to your remaining —"

"He has not consented," she interrupted. "I am supposed to be safely lodged with friends in Lewisburg, but rode out here this afternoon to see

the condition of our property. Word came to me that the house had been entered. The servants have all gone, and we were obliged to leave it unoccupied. I was delayed, seeking to discover what damage the vandals had done, and then suddenly the storm broke, and I thought it better to remain until morning."

She laughed, as though amused at her own frankness of speech.

"There, I have told you all my story, without even waiting to hear yours. 'Tis a woman's way, if her impulse be sufficiently strong."

"You mean faith in the other party?"

"Of course; one cannot be conventional in war-times, and there is no one here to properly introduce us, even if that formality was desired. So I must accept you on trust."

"My uniform alone should be sufficient guarantee."

She laughed; her eyes sparkling.

"Well hardly. I imagine you fail to comprehend its really disreputable condition. No doubt, sir, it was at one time a thing of beauty, for I cannot justly criticise the rather fashionable cut, or the quality of cloth, but it has evidently passed through both stress and weather. No," shaking her head solemnly, yet with frank good humor in her eyes,

“the uniform is no recommendation whatever, and but — well, you — you look like an officer and a gentleman.”

“For which compliment I sincerely thank you. That is far better than a dependence on clothes alone, yet never before did I feel that my face was my fortune. However, Miss Harwood, my story can be quickly told. I am a lieutenant, Third United States Cavalry — see, the numeral is on my hat — attached to Heitzelman’s command, now at Fairfax Court House. I have recently been detailed to the recruiting service, and ordered to this section. If necessary to convince you of my identity you may even examine the official papers in this packet.”

She shook her head, her glance straying from the official buff envelope back to my face. The look in her eyes was expressive of some slight bewilderment.

“No; that is not necessary. I believe your word.”

I found it strangely difficult, fronting her calm look of insistence, to go on. But there was no way of escape. Beyond doubt the sympathy of this girl was with the cause of the North, and if I was to confess myself Tom Wyatt, and a Confederate spy, all hope of the success of my mission would be immediately ended. Besides I lacked the will to forfeit

her esteem — to permit her confidence in me to become changed into suspicion.

“Then I will go on,” I said more slowly, endeavoring better to arrange my story. “I picked up a guide at Fayette, but the officer in command there could spare no escort. The man who went with me must have been a traitor, for he guided me south into the Green Briar Mountains. Last night at dusk we rode into a camp of guerrillas.”

“Who commanded them? Did you learn?”

“A gray-headed, seamed-faced mountaineer, they called Cowan.”

She emitted a quick breath, between closely pressed lips.

“You know the man?” I asked.

“Yes; old Ned Cowan; he lived over yonder, east of here in the foot-hills. He and — and my father had some trouble before the war. He — he is vindictive and dangerous.” She stopped, her glance sweeping about the room. “I — I have some reason to suspect,” she added, as if half doubting whether she ought to speak the word, “that either he, or one of his men, broke in here.”

“In search of something?”

“A paper; yes — a deed. Of course I may be mistaken; only it is not to be found. The desk in the library was rifled, and its contents scattered over

the floor when I came. I put them back in place, but found nothing of value among those that remained. My father must have removed those of importance.

“Possibly he carried them with him?”

She leaned her head on her hand, her eyes thoughtful.

“I think he once told me they were left in charge of a banker at Charleston — an old friend. It would be too dangerous to carry them about with him in the field. You see I do not know very much about his affairs,” she explained. “I was away at school when the war broke out, and we have only met briefly since. My father did not talk freely of his personal matters even to me. I learned of his feud with Cowan by accident.”

“It was a feud then?”

“On one side at least. My father was shot at, and several of our outhouses burned. The trouble arose over the title to property. Cowan,” she explained, “was a squatter on land which had belonged to our family ever since my grandfather first settled here. We had title from Virginia, but the tract granted had never been properly surveyed. My father had it done, and discovered that Ned Cowan and two of his sons occupied a part of our land with no legal right.”

Her eyes uplifted to my face, and then fell again, one hand opening and closing on the back of the chair. She laughed pleasantly.

"I hardly know why I am telling you all this family history," she continued almost in apology. "It is as if I talked to an old friend who was naturally interested in our affairs."

"I am interested, although I can scarcely claim the distinction of old friend."

"Really. I supposed your attitude was that of mere politeness. But I may as well go on now, although I am not at all inclined to confide so suddenly in a stranger. People, I believe, usually find me rather secretive."

"Perhaps the manner of our meeting accounts for the change," I ventured. "But truly I am more deeply interested than you imagine. It may prove of mutual advantage for me to know the facts. Did Major Harwood try to force them from his land?"

"Oh, no," hastily, "my father had no such thought. He tried to help them to purchase the property at a very small price, and on long time. His intention was to aid them, but he found himself unable to convince either father or sons of his real purpose. They either could not, or would not, understand. Do you realize the reckless, lawless nature of these mountain men?"

“Yes, to some extent; they trust no one.”

“That was the whole trouble. Seemingly they possessed but one idea — that if my father was killed they could remain where they were indefinitely. Their single instinct was to fight it out with rifles. They refused to either purchase or leave.

There was silence, as though she had finished, and I was endeavoring to connect this revelation of affairs, in my own mind, with the known occurrences of the past few days. She had seated herself on the wide arm of the chair, still facing me, and I could hear the rain beating hard against the side of the house. Suddenly she looked up into my face.

“How odd that I should talk to you so freely,” she exclaimed. “Why I do not even know your name.”

“It was written in the papers.”

“But I did not look — what is it, please?”

“Charles H. Raymond.”

I could not be certain that the expression of her eyes changed, for they suddenly looked away from me, and she stood again upon her feet.

“Raymond, you say!” the slightest hardening of tone apparent, “on recruiting service from the Army of the Potomac?” She drew a quick breath. “I — I think I have heard the name before. Would you mind if I did ask to see your orders?”

“Not in the least,” I answered, not wholly surprised that she should have heard of the other, and confident the papers I bore would be properly executed. “I prefer that you have no doubt as to my identity.”

She took them, and I noted a slight trembling of her hands as she held the paper open in her fingers, her eyes glancing swiftly down the written lines. She had doubtless heard of this Raymond, some rumor of his coming — perhaps Fox had mentioned it as he rode through Lewisburg on the way east. It was merely curiosity that caused a desire to peruse the papers, a mere wish to thoroughly satisfy herself. Her eyes were clear of suspicion as they glanced at me over the paper

“I have become quite a soldier of late,” she said, and handed the package back to me. “And I cannot doubt your credentials. I am very glad to meet you, Lieutenant Raymond,” and she held out her hand cordially. “As I have admitted already, I am Noreen Harwood.”

“Whom I shall only be delighted to serve in any manner possible,” I replied gallantly, relieved that she was so easily convinced.

“Oh, I think the service is more likely to be mine. You confessed you broke in here seeking after food and a fire. Down below we may find both, and it

will be my pleasure thus to serve a Federal officer. You have a lamp without?"

"On the stairs?"

She led the way like a mistress in her own home, and I followed. There was a force of character about the girl not to be ignored. She chose to treat me as a guest, uninvited, but none the less welcome, a position I was not reluctant to accept. I held the lamp as we went down the stairs together, the rays of light pressing aside the curtain of darkness.

CHAPTER IX

ARRIVAL OF PARSON NICHOLS



HE put aside laughingly my suggestion of assistance. Indeed her appearance of good humor caused me to feel that the girl was really glad of my presence in the house, this relieving her of loneliness.

“Not a word of protest,” she said gaily, waving me to the chair beside the table. “You must remember I am mistress here, and the entertainment of guests is my privilege.”

“Hardly a guest, when I came stealthily crawling in through a broken window.”

“The only entrance possible. That is all forgotten, now that your eminent respectability has been so thoroughly established. Really, Lieutenant, I cannot but feel honored by so distinguished a visitor. General Ramsay said you were one of the most popular officers in the army.”

“Did he, indeed? It was from Ramsay then you learned of my coming.”

“Captain Fox told me what General Ramsay said; there is quite a grapevine telegraph in this country — news travels rapidly. I was even in-

formed that you were the champion revolver shot of your division. To such distinction I can only bow in reverence."

She swept me a low curtsey, her laughing eyes smiling in the lamp light. Before I answered, the fire in the grate burst into blaze, and her hands were busily rearranging the table.

"With no servants left, and the house unoccupied for months," she explained, "I shall have to give you soldier fare, and, perhaps, not very much of that. Someone has made free of our larder since we left, from all appearances the same gentleman who broke in through the window, no doubt — and I discovered little remaining even for myself. But such as it is I give it to you. Pardon my not joining in the feast, as I have only just eaten."

She drew up a chair opposite to where I sat, supporting her chin in her hands. The light between us illumined her face, outlining it clearly against the gloom of the wall behind. It was a young face, almost girlish in a way, although there was a grave, strong look to the eyes, and womanly firmness about lips and chin. I had seen so little of her in the days gone by as scarcely to retain in memory a detail of her face; she had been to me but a swiftly flashing vision, the merest recollection of bright eyes, and loosened hair flying in the wind. And here I found

her a woman — a woman with all a girl's slenderness of form, and unconventionality of manner, yet capable and thoughtful, her mind clear, and loyal to her ideals — a woman of charm, of rare beauty even; sweet and wholesome in look, her cheeks aglow with health, her eyes deep wells of mystery and promise. I felt something choke in my throat as I glanced at her — a regret that I had lied, that I had deceived. Yet I saw no way in which I could escape my unfortunate predicament. I had taken the false step, and my duty to my service, my loyalty to Jackson, to Lee, to my comrades of the South, forbade any disclosure of my mission. The sympathy of the girl was unquestionably with the Northern Army; there could be no doubt as to that; her father wore Federal uniform, and had given up all for the cause. Her father! why I dare not even tell her of his death, of his dastardly murder. My lips were now completely sealed to the truth, because any attempt to explain would swiftly arouse her suspicion. Indeed it was strange she had not recognized me, although I realized to some extent, the change in my personal appearance since our last encounter — the uniform, the short, soldierly cut of my hair, the marks which exposure and peril had left on my features. Yet probably the real truth was that she had never before observed me with any care or

interest — considering me a mere boy to be laughed at and forgotten. Nothing about me at present served to even remind her of what I had once been. I was only a stranger entering into her life for the first time. This expression was in the eyes surveying me as I ate — quiet, earnest eyes, utterly devoid of suspicion. I was so busy with these thoughts that she broke the silence.

“You are a very young man,” she said simply.

“Not seriously so,” I answered, rather inclined to resent the charge. “I am twenty-four.”

“Really! Why that is not so bad. How old am I?”

I could have told her to the day, but chose to venture a guess.

“Seventeen.”

“A year and a half too young. You are no better guesser than I am. You look like a boy I used to know — only his eyes were darker, and he had long hair.”

“Indeed!” I caught my breath quickly, yet held my eyes firm. “Someone living about here?”

“Yes; his name was Wyatt. I never knew him very well, only you recalled him to memory in some way. He and his mother went South when the war first broke out. Where was your home?”

“In Burlington, Vermont.”

“You are a regular soldier?”

“I was a junior at West Point last year; we were graduated ahead of our class.”

Her eyes fell, the lashes outlined on her cheeks, her hands clasped on the table.

“Isn’t that odd!” she said quietly. “Do you know Mme. Hactell’s school for young ladies at Compton on the Hudson? That is where papa sent me, and I was at the senior hop at West Point a year ago last June. A half dozen of us girls went up; Fred Carlton, of Charleston, was in that class, and he invited me. You knew him, of course?”

My lips were dry, but I nodded, half fearful I might be slipping into some trap, although her words and manner were surely innocent enough.

“We were acquaintances, not friends,” I replied, hoping the retort might cause her to change the subject.

“Most of the boys seemed to like him. He was very pleasant to me, and I had a splendid time. I met one cadet named Raymond; he had dark hair and eyes.”

“Oh, yes,” I managed to answer, now desperately alert. “There was another in the class — James R., I believe.”

“I did not learn his first name, but when I heard that a Lieutenant Raymond was coming here, I

hoped it might be he. That was why I was so deeply interested. It is not such a common name, you know."

I made some answer, and she sat there silently, her face turned now toward the fire in the grate. The profile held me in fascination, as I wondered what these seemingly innocent questions could signify. Were they innocently asked? or did the girl secretly suspect my identity, and my purpose? If she had recognized me as Tom Wyatt, and was pretending not, merely to learn my object, then surely she had already proven herself a remarkable actress. No expression of eye, or voice, led me to believe this. The questions were, indeed, natural enough — the only strange feature the coincident of her previous brief acquaintance with the man whom I had recklessly chosen to impersonate. Anyhow, let the truth be what it may, there was no other course left for me, but to keep on with the deception. I was in the heart of the enemy's country, in disguise, my life forfeit in case of discovery, and the time had not come when I could entrust her with so dangerous a secret.

The wind rattled the blinds, and the rain beat heavily against the side of the house. The thought of venturing out into the storm, not knowing where I could seek shelter, was not an alluring one. Nor

had I any excuse to urge for immediate departure; indeed as a gentleman and soldier my duty called me to remain for her protection. She could not be left alone in this desolate house. These thoughts flitted through my mind, as my eyes studied her face, but the final decision was made for me. I had heard no sound other than that of the storm without, and the crackling of flames within. We seemed alone, isolated, utterly beyond the zone of danger. That others might be abroad on such a night never occurred to me. It was rather my steady gaze that roused the lady from whatever dream the flames of the grate had given her. She turned her head to meet my eyes — then sat suddenly erect, the expression of her face instantly changing, as she stared beyond me at the open door. I wheeled about to look, startled at the movement. A man stood in the doorway, water streaming from his clothes onto the floor. I was on my feet instantly, a hand gripping my revolver, but before I could whip it from the leather sheave, the girl had taken the single step forward, and grasped my sleeve.

“Do not fire!” she exclaimed. “He is not a fighting man.”

The fellow lifted one arm, and stepped forward full into the light. He was a man of years, unarmed, a tall, ungainly figure, a scraggly beard at his chin,

and a face like parchment. His eyes were two deep wells, solemn and unwinking.

"Peace to you both!" he said gravely. "I ask naught save fire and shelter."

"To these you are welcome," the girl answered, still clinging to my arm. "You travel alone?"

"Even as my master in rags and poverty, having no place wherein to lay my head. The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests — you know me, young woman?"

"Yes; you are Parson Nichols."

"An unworthy soldier of the Cross. I address the daughter of Major Harwood — and this young man?"

"Lieutenant Raymond, of the Federal Army," she explained simply. "He sought refuge here from the storm."

The man's eyes searched my face, but without cordiality, without expression of any kind. Deliberately he removed his long, water soaked cloak, and flung it over the back of a chair, placing his hat on top. His undergarments were dry enough, butternut jeans, and he wore high boots, splashed with mud. His head, the hair upon it thin and gray, rose into a peculiar pear-shaped peak, but his temples were broad and prominent. Saying nothing he crossed to the fireplace, and held out his hands to the warmth

of the blaze. The girl's eyes met mine almost questioningly.

"You know him?" I whispered.

"Who he is — yes; a Baptist mountain preacher. But why is he here? what purpose brings him?"

"An accident, no doubt; overtaken by the storm."

She shook her head, unconvinced. Then she stepped forward.

"We were just completing our meal," she said softly. "There is not much, but we will gladly share what we have."

"The flesh needeth nothing," he answered, not even looking around, "and the spirit liveth on the bread of life. I seek only converse with you. The young man is an officer?"

"Yes — on recruiting service."

"You know him well? you trust him?"

"I — I have not known him long," she replied hesitatingly, and glancing back at me. "Yet I have confidence in him." The man did not answer, or move, and, after a moment of silence, she asked:

"Have you ridden far?"

"From Lewisburg."

"Lewisburg!" in surprise. "Then you knew I was here? you came seeking me?"

He turned on his stool, his eyes searching her face gravely.

“On a mission of my ministry,” he replied solemnly, “although whether it prove of joy, or sorrow, I am unable to say. I am but an instrument.”

The man’s reluctance to speak freely was apparent, and I stepped forward.

“If you prefer conversing with Miss Harwood alone,” I said quietly, “I will retire.”

“The words I would speak are indeed of a confidential nature — ”

“No, no!” she broke in impulsively, her eyes of appeal turned toward me. “Do not leave us, Lieutenant. This man has nothing to say I am afraid to have you hear. He has not come here as a friend; there is some evil purpose in all this, which I cannot fathom.” She faced him now, her slender body poised, her eyes on his. “Tell me what it is — this mysterious mission? Ay! and who sent you to find me? I will not believe it was my father.”

The minister rose to his feet, a tall, ungainly figure, his solemn face as expressionless as before, but a smouldering resentment was in his deep-set eyes. He possessed the look of a fanatic, one who would hesitate at nothing to gain his end. To me he was even repulsive in his narrow bigotry.

“No, it was not your father,” he said almost coarsely, “but it is a part of my mission to bring to you, young woman, the news of your father’s death.”

"Death? My father dead?" she stepped back from him, her hands pressed against her eyes. Obeying the first instinct of protection, I stepped to support her as she seemed about to fall. "That cannot be! You lie! I know you lie! You were never his friend. You come here to tell me that to frighten me; to compel me to do something wrong."

The man exhibited no trace of emotion, no evidence of regret, his voice the same hard, metallic sound.

"I expected this outburst," he continued unmoved. "Indeed, it is no more than natural. I am the Lord's servant, and must expect abuse and reviling from the unconverted; yet will I not be swerved from the line of duty. It is true that the Major and I differed in many things—he was of the world worldly, while the light which guideth my path is spiritual. But I harbor no resentment, and in this hour freely forgive all. 'He that taketh the sword, shall perish by the sword,' and my words are true."

"But I saw him four days ago."

"On his way east to Hot Springs, with an escort of soldiers. It was there he was killed, together with his servant. A messenger brought the news."

"A soldier? One of Captain Fox's men?"

A sardonic smile flickered an instant on the preacher's thin lips.

“No, but equally reliable; one of Ned Cowan’s mountaineers. Captain Fox is a prisoner, wounded, and his men mostly dead.”

A moment she rested unknowingly against my arm, her face covered with her hands. There was that in the man’s words and manner which convinced her that he spoke the truth. Nor could I strengthen her by any denial, comfort her by any expression of hope. There was not a sob, not a sound to indicate suffering, but the face she finally lifted so that the light again fell upon it was white and drawn. The girl had changed to a woman. She stood erect, alone, one hand grasping the back of a chair.

“You say my father is dead — killed,” she said, in steady, clear voice, “and that Captain Fox is wounded, and a prisoner. You tell me this on the report of one of Ned Cowan’s men. It may be true, or it may be a lie, concocted to frighten me. But be that one way or the other, you never came here tonight, through this storm, to bring me such a message alone. Who sent you, Parson Nichols? What deviltry is on foot?”

“My dear young lady,” he began smoothly, spreading his hands deprecatingly. “Be charitable, and just. I realize that in the first shock of thus suddenly learning of your father’s demise, you naturally speak harshly. With me the past is forgot-

ten, blotted out, covered with the mantle of Christian charity. I felt it my duty to break to you this sad news in all possible tenderness."

"And you had no other object?"

"Certainly not; what other could I possibly have had?"

The man lied, and I knew it; the suave, soft tones of his voice irritated me. That he was a sneaking, canting hypocrite I realized from the first glance, and my fingers itched to grip him by the throat, and wring the real truth out of him. The girl stood motionless, silent, her breath coming in sobs. Then she turned her head slightly, and her eyes met mine. The piteous appeal in their depths was all I needed. With a grim feeling of delight, I took a step forward, and the muzzle of my revolver touched his breast.

"Now, Mister Preacherman," I said shortly, "we'll have done with this play-acting. Not a move! I understand firearms. It is a soldier, not a girl, you are dealing with now."

CHAPTER X

THE JAWS OF THE TRAP



FEYES alone possessed the power to kill, his would have done the deed, but the face with which I confronted him was sufficiently grim to make him realize the danger of a movement. He gave back a step, but my revolver pressed his side.

“Listen to me first,” I continued, “and be careful how you answer. I may know more of this affair than you imagine, and I am not tolerant of lies. You came here tonight expecting to find Miss Harwood alone in this house. You were told she was here, and instructed to come. There was an object in your visit — a special purpose, in which others were also interested. You did not expect to have to deal with anyone but a young, unprotected girl. You were so certain of this that you are not even armed. You came in advance of others, and under orders, but, finding me here, you dared not openly avow your real object. That is the truth, is it not?”

He made no reply, his lips tightly closed, his deep-set eyes scarcely visible.

“Don’t try obstinancy with me, Nichols,” I said sternly, “for you are either going to talk, or die. I’ll give you one chance, and one only. I despise your kind, and will kill you with pleasure. Now answer me — who told you of Major Harwood’s death?”

“I have said already; the message was brought to Lewisburg by one of Ned Cowan’s men.”

“Yes, so you did; but you never received it at Lewisburg. Oh, yes, I know something myself. The fact is you never came here tonight from Lewisburg, now did you? Do you want me to tell you where you came from? Well, it was the mountains the other side of the Green Briar — from old Ned Cowan’s camp. There is where you learned of Harwood’s death, and of the attack on Fox. Now are you ready to talk to me? Oh! you are! Very well, who sent you — Cowan?”

I ran my gun muzzle hard into his ribs, and he nodded sullenly, his lips drawn back in a snarl. All the soft palaver had vanished, and he had become a cowed brute.

“I thought so; you belong yourself to the Cowan gang?”

“Not — not in their deeds of blood and violence,” he protested. “The calls of my church compel me to minister to my scattered flock —”

“Never mind that kind of palaver, Nichols. The fact that you were with that old devil, and that he sent you here, is all I wanted to learn. Now what did he send you for?”

I waited, my eyes on his. I could not see the girl, and dare not avert my gaze for so much as an instant. The man wet his lips, as if they were parched, and I could perceive the nervous movement of his throat.

“Well, you are slower in answering me than is altogether safe. I’ll warn you this once. Ned Cowan knew, by some means, that Miss Harwood was alone in this house tonight. He ordered you to come here for some special purpose of his own — what was it? Is he coming later?”

“I — I don’t know.”

“Don’t know what? — this is my last call!”

“I don’t know whether he is coming, or not,” he blurted out reluctantly. “He was hurt in the fight.”

“And if he cannot come himself he means to send others. What for? To loot the house? Come, it must be something different from that, or he would not be so anxious to surprise the lady here alone. You know, Nichols! and you are going to answer! What does he want of the girl?”

My hammer clicked, and the man cringing back, read the stern meaning of my face. A terrible sus-

picion surged over me, and I was ready to kill. He knew his life hung by a hair.

“To — to marry her,” the words barely audible.

“Marry her!” I echoed. “What in heaven’s name do you mean, man — old Ned Cowan marry her?”

“No,” he stammered, as though fearful he could not explain fast enough. “Not old Ned — his son, Anse.”

I heard the startled exclamation of the girl behind me.

“Anse Cowan!” she cried, her voice full of undisguised horror. “Marry me to that low brute. Did he ever imagine I would consent, ever even look at him?”

I touched her with my hand in restraint, the revolver still at the preacher’s heart. The whole foul plot lay exposed in my mind.

“There was no intention of asking your consent, Miss Harwood,” I said, satisfied that she should know all, and face the truth. “There is a reason for this desperate act which I do not wholly fathom, but it has to do with the property here, and the feud between Cowan and your father. If Major Harwood be dead, as this man reports, you are the sole heir, and old Ned has conceived the idea of marrying you by force to his son. He has learned you are

here alone, and unprotected, and in this creature of his — this canting preacher — he has found a fit tool ready at hand to do his dirty work. Is that it, Nichols?”

He muttered something inaudible.

“They sent you on ahead to make sure Miss Harwood was here, and to remain until they arrived. How many are going to be in this happy wedding party?”

The man shook his head sullenly, and I gripped him by the throat.

“Answer, you black-hearted cur; you have confessed too much to hide anything now. How many are coming with Anse Cowan?”

“Maybe a half dozen of the boys. I don’t know; they were talking about it when I left, and thought it was going to be a great lark.”

“Well, it is; you are finding that out already. When were they to be here?” I shook him to loosen his lagging tongue.

“They were to ride out an hour after I did.”

I threw the wretch back into the chair before the fire, but held him still cowering before the point of my revolver. The dog had told us all he knew, and there was a snarl to his thin lips, drawn back and exposing his yellow teeth, showing that his only thought now was revenge. Any moment that gang

of ruffians might appear, and I was helpless there alone to contend against them. Indeed there was no way in which we could hope to protect ourselves, unless it was by flight through the storm. There might yet be time for that effort, although it was impossible to decide which might prove the safer road to choose. I had arrived on foot, yet surely Miss Harwood must have a riding horse stabled somewhere close at hand. These considerations flashed through my mind, as I stared into Nichol's face. The house was silent; the only sound the noise of wind and rain, the anxious breathing of the girl pressing against my shoulder. I dared not move, dared not avert my gaze from the preacher; there was hatred and treachery in the depths of his eyes.

"Is there a lock on the parlor door leading into the hall?" I asked.

"A bolt — yes."

"Please close and bolt it, and then come back here."

I heard her turn and cross the room; caught the sound as she shot the bolt, and her light step again on the floor.

"Now, something to tie this man with. We must be quick — the table-cloth will do! sweep that clutter of dishes onto the floor. Good! now cut me the cord from that picture."

I had no thought of glancing about; I can scarcely conceive even now that I did, yet my eyes must have wandered an instant, for Nichols had the wrist of my pistol hand in his grip, and jerked me half off my feet. Even as I staggered, I struck out with my left, landing fairly on his face, and he went back over the chair, crushing it beneath him. But as he fell he dragged the revolver from my fingers, and sent it spinning across the floor. The next instant we clinched, our bodies pressed half way into the fireplace. There was a moment of fierce, breathless struggle, during which we rolled out against the table, our limbs interlocked, our hands gripping for advantage. The girl never screamed or emitted a sound. Some dim consciousness told me she was held prisoner between the table and wall, the revolver on the floor beyond her reach. I had no time to think, to do aught but fight desperately. He had my throat in a grip like iron, and my fingers were twined in his hair. But my left arm was free, and I drove my fist again and again into his face in short jabs that brought blood. The fellow possessed no skill, but the wiry strength of a tiger. I found his eyes with my fist, and dazed, his hands released their grip, and I broke loose, my throat livid from his finger marks. The flap of a gray skirt touched my face, and a blow fell — the man went limp un-

der me, his head upheld by the angle of the wall. I struggled to my knees, still staring at him, uncertain as to what had actually occurred, struggling for breath. The girl stood over me, white-faced, her eyes wide open with horror, the remnant of the teapot in her hand. Suddenly her hands covered her eyes, the fragment of crockery falling noisily to the floor.

"I — I struck him," she sobbed, unnerved. "I — I have killed him!"

"No such good luck," I answered, recovering myself, and grasping her hands, so that I could look into her eyes. "The man is not dead — only stunned by the blow. He will be conscious in a minute. Do not become frightened; you did right, and we have no time to lose. You have a horse somewhere?"

"Yes, in the stable."

"Get whatever you need for a ride through the storm. Be quick, for those villains may be here at any moment. I'll tie Nichols, and wait for you at the foot of the rear stairs."

She hesitated, her hands still held in mine unconsciously.

"You — you mean I am to ride for Lewisburg — and — and you?"

"Oh, I must do the best I can on foot. We'll keep together as long as possible; only you must not

fall into the hands of these men — not if this fellow is a specimen of their class.”

“Him!” she looked at him with disgust, curling her lips. “I am not afraid of him, but — but Anse Cowan,” she shuddered, staring out into the dark hall. “I — I would rather be dead than have that foul beast touch me.”

“Then go, as I say, and hurry. Get a wrap, and your revolver.”

She slipped out of the room, and up the stairs, her light steps making no sound on the soft carpet. I bent over Nichols, and as I touched him he stirred, and opened his eyes, staring up into my face. The heavy pot had cut a deep gash in the side of his head, which bled freely, and one of his eyes was puffed nearly closed where I had pummelled him. There was no fight left in the fellow, and he cringed back at sight of me, flinging up his arm in defense, all manhood beaten out of him.

“Don’t hit me!” he whined. “I’m no friend of Anse Cowan.”

“So you’ve had enough! Then take orders from me.”

I gathered in the picture cord the girl had dropped on the floor, deciding swiftly what it was best to do. If I left the fellow lying bound there those new arrivals would discover him as soon as they got into the

house. His story would make clear our escape, and how we had gone. Every moment of delay was of the utmost value, and if I could successfully hide this preacher where he could not be so easily discovered, the search for him would retard pursuit — his friends would be puzzled by his disappearance, and waste time seeking for him.

“Turn over, Nichols! Oh, yes you can — all that troubles you is a sore head. Come, move quick; that’s it. Now put your hands behind your back — both of them. I mean to have you safe this time.”

His wrists were big and knotted, and I drew the cord tight enough to make the fellow wince, despite his groans and pretense at severe suffering. There was no reason why I should spare him, nor could I feel any inclination to do so. I jerked him to his feet, using no gentle methods of persuasion, and turned his face to the door, picking up the lamp to give light for the journey.

“Go up the stairs,” I commanded sternly, “and keep close to the wall. Oh, you can walk all right, my friend, and I advise you to do as I say — you see this gun?”

The scowl on his face was malignant, and his eyes glowed like coals, but he moved on ahead of me across the hall, and up the carpeted steps. The lamp held high above my head in one hand, sent a stream

of light through the black shadows, and revealed his every movement. Once he paused and glanced back over his shoulder, muttering some threat for which I cared nothing, but the gleam of my revolver caught his eyes, as I lifted it to a level, and he went on, growling to himself. At the head of the stairs the girl suddenly appeared, her face showing white in the glow of the lamp. A brown cape, fastened closely at the throat, enveloped her figure, and a cap was drawn down over her hair.

“What is it?” she questioned swiftly. “Have the others come?”

“Not yet, but our friend here revived, and I thought it best to put him where he would be safe. Is there any room up here windowless, and with a door that can be locked?”

She glanced about, uncertain.

“Why — oh, yes! there is a large closet off my room where he might be locked in. He — he was not badly hurt?”

“Nothing more serious than a headache. Turn to the right, Nichols; into that room, where the light is burning. Oh, yes, you will! Kindly open the closet door, Miss Harwood. Ah! a prison cell made to order. Comfort enough here Mr. Preacher, and ample room even for your length of limb. It will be a fine place in which to meditate. Step in, man!

Don't stand growling there, for it will do no good — we have ourselves to think about. Get in, I say!"

He was so slow, that I thrust him roughly through the opening, and closed and locked the door. The girl had placed the lamp on a table, and, as I turned, her eyes met mine.

"Suppose they — they fail to come?" she questioned. "He could not get out; he might die in there."

"Little danger of their not coming. Anyhow I prefer risking that fellow's life rather than yours. Is he really a preacher?"

"Yes; he has a church at the Crossroads. I heard him preach once at a camp meeting. He was here before when Tom's wife died, and conducted the funeral."

"Tom? one of the servants?"

"Yes, my father's body servant. He accompanied him to the army." The tears rushed to her eyes, dimming them, and her hand touched my sleeve. "Oh, Lieutenant, do you really suppose he has been killed?"

"We can only hope," I answered, catching my breath quickly. "Nichols may have told that for a purpose — a desire to make you feel helpless and alone. But we cannot stand here and talk. You

know the way and can guide us in the dark, can you not? It will be safer not to leave the lamp burning."

I blew the light out without waiting for an answer, and took her hand in mine.

"Now you must lead," I said softly. "We will go down the back stairs."

We slipped out into the hall together, her clasp on my fingers warm and confident, and I closed the door of the room behind us. Nichols had shouted some threat as the lock clicked, but was now silent. The soft carpet under foot enabled us to move noiselessly, and there was no sound in the deserted house. A flash of lightning enabled me to glimpse the window at the end of the hall, and my companion's face. She looked pale under the peak of her boy's cap, her eyes large and opened wide, a strand of loosened hair shadowing one cheek. Then it was pitchy darkness again, and all about us the silence of a tomb. My hand encountered the baluster rail, and she had taken a single step downward, when we heard a voice below, and the crash of what was probably the stock of a rifle on the outer door. A second blow fell, followed by the sound of splintering wood. The voice came sharper, clearer; I could distinguish the words.

"Now, once more, Kelly! There's nothing to be afraid of, man. Break it a foot lower down, so

I can reach the key. Where is Anse? do you know, Jake?"

"He an' Bill are 'round front," some fellow answered hoarsely. "Thar's a busted winder thar. Yer saw ther light up stairs didn't yer?"

"Sure — the gurl's yere all right, but it don't look as if the preacher wus. I reckon he got afeerd, an' wus waitin fer us ter show up furst. Here, you, Kelly, giv' me aholt on thet club."

She shrank back against me, with a little startled cry, and I held her close. There was no noise as yet toward the front of the house, but two of the villains were there — one of them Anse Cowan. Beyond doubt they had entered the parlor through the broken window, and were groping about in the darkness, seeking for some passage leading into the hall. We were in the trap, caught between the closing jaws.

CHAPTER XI

WHAT WE OVERHEARD



I COULD feel the trembling of her body, and for an instant my brain seemed to reel with dizziness. The danger confronting us was not so much mine as hers; my uniform might possibly save me, or, at least, prevent my suffering from anything more unpleasant than capture, but there was no such hope for the girl. These men were not soldiers but desperadoes, the scum of the hills, and they had come actuated by one object only — the possession of Major Harwood's daughter. What the real purpose of the Cowans might be I could not even conjecture, but this night raid was, beyond all doubt, a part of that same foul plot which had involved the cowardly murder of the father. That had been the work of the elder Cowan, and now had come the turn of the son. Here was the culmination of the feud between the two families, the blood-anger which had smouldered for years, finally to find fit expression in this outrage under the guise of war. With the Major dead, and his only child married to Anse Cowan — whether by force, or otherwise —

the account would be closed. Once legally this villain's wife all her inheritance would be in his control. That must be the object, the vile, cowardly purpose, which had brought him, and his murderous crew to this lonely house through the storm. He expected to surprise the girl alone, and unprotected; in the canting preacher Nichols he had a tool fitted to do his bidding, yet even under such conditions he dare not venture on the deed unaccompanied. He had to bring a gang of cut-throats along with him — a dozen men to overcome the resistance of a frail girl. That very fact stamped him for what he was — a sneaking cur, afraid of his contemplated crime. True; yet this did not necessarily mean that he would prove any the less dangerous. His very sense of cowardice might render him the more desperate, while the number of his supporters, and their jeers at any failure on his part, would drive him to greater atrocity. All this flashed over me in the single moment we stood there, hesitating, confused, all our plans for escape instantly shattered. I had no thought but to fight — to fight desperately, protecting this girl's honor with my life. I knew of no escape, no means by which we might find a way out of the toils in which we were caught — we must meet them here at the stair head, in the dark, and defend ourselves to the last extremity. Death, even,

was far preferable to falling alive into their hands. I felt instinctively that it would be her choice. She had uttered no sound, no cry after that first startled exclamation. Suddenly her hands grasped mine in which I gripped the revolver.

“Do not shoot — not yet!” she whispered, the sound of her words barely audible. “Wait; there is one chance still that we may deceive them.”

“A way leading out? You mean a secret passage?”

“No, but a spot where we might hide, and be overlooked. I am sure none of these men know this house; Anse Cowan has never been inside of it, and most of the ruffians with him are from beyond the mountains. If they do not find us here when they search, they will believe we have escaped.”

“They will discover the preacher,” I protested, yet with a faint throb of hope. “He will be heard from presently, and they will learn the truth from him.”

“All he knows — yes; but that is not much. He cannot be sure that we have not had time in which to get safely away. The two of us cannot defend both these stairs,” she urged, “and our only hope is in hiding. Come now, while we have time — there they are, battering at the parlor door. They will be in the hall next, and it will be too late.”

She drew me back, and I yielded to the grasp of her hand. The darkness was intense, but she moved swiftly and surely, as though knowing intimately every inch of the way; her fingers touching mine were warm and firm, no longer trembling. Action had brought back her courage, and I felt my own heart beat stronger in response. Anything was better than hopeless waiting — any chance, any desperate effort. The door in front crashed, and an oath rumbled upward; to the rear a light flashed, its reflection reddening the stair. Aided by its distant flicker we raced back down the upper hall to where it narrowed. A ladder stood there leading upward to a small scuttle above. Instantly my mind grasped her plan — the attic! If we could attain the attic unseen, drawing the ladder up after us and lowering the cover over the hole, our presence in the house might remain unsuspected. It was a low, flat roof; the space above must be small, and, unless the fellows knew of this ladder and opening, the place would probably never be observed in the course of their hasty search of the rooms. Even at the worst our opportunity for defense would be better up above than in that open hallway.

“I see what you mean,” I said swiftly. “Go up first, Miss Noreen — hurry. Is the ladder fastened to the floor?”

“By a single small nail in each support; only enough to hold it firm. It was kept here in case of fire.”

“Yes, I see; I can kick it loose easily. Don’t delay; those fellows will be up the stairs in a moment more, and they are bringing a light with them. Here, let me help you.”

She crept through the narrow scuttlehole, her supple, slender body finding easy passage. With two blows of my boot I loosened the supports, freeing them from the floors, and mounted recklessly. Already men were on the stairs, the gleam of an approaching light reflecting along the side-walls. There was light flooring above, and sufficient space in which to move freely, although I could see nothing, not even the breathless girl at my side. Together we grasped the upper rungs, and drew up the ladder, sliding it in behind us on the floor. The scuttle cover was on hinges, and I clamped it down securely into place. Fortunately it slipped over the edge of the hole noiselessly, but the thin center board had warped slightly, leaving a little space, through which stole a tiny gleam of light, growing brighter as the searchers below advanced along the hall. It was no more than a narrow bar outlined on the roof overhead, and yielding us an indistinct glimpse of each other’s faces, as we lay there pressed closely together

in silent suspense. I stretched forward, endeavoring to peer down through the narrow crack, but was baffled by its smallness. Only the steadiness of the light, the voices, and the varied noises below, gave us information of what occurred. Yet these served to reveal clearly enough the progress of the searching party, and the conclusions to which they arrived. They possessed more than one lamp, because a light continued to burn steadily in the hall while the fellows were busily exploring the rooms on either side. We could distinguish the opening and closing of doors, and the sound of voices calling to others on the floor below. Once some fellow, apparently just beneath us, ripped out an oath.

"Well, by God, Jack, do you suppose Nichols has dared play such a durned trick on me and squealed to the girl?"

"Hanged if I know," was the sullen reply. "But it don't look like thar was a soul in the house."

"Yer right it don't, but I can't believe he ever had the nerve to do such a damn trick. I'll foller the cuss ter hell an' back if he has."

I felt her hand touch mine softly, and bent my head until her lips were at my ear.

"That was Anse Cowan," she whispered. "I recognize that voice. What do you suppose they will do now?"

The one fear in my heart was that in the fierce anger of disappointment they might fire the house, but I could not frighten her by giving utterance to the suspicion. My fingers tightened their grip; the men below had moved on, their voices grumbling along the hall.

"They will discover the preacher presently," I said, endeavoring to make my words as reassuring as possible. "I only wonder they have overlooked him so long; I supposed he would make an outcry."

"Perhaps he is afraid," she commented. "I have heard that Anse Cowan has a horrible temper, and when things go wrong acts like a crazed man — Nichols may dread facing his anger, and hope to escape discovery by remaining still."

"That may be true; the fellow is chicken-hearted enough from what I saw of him, but no less a villain. They will find him, however, for, from the sounds, they are prying into every nook and cranny. I heard them breaking down one door which must have been locked — there! they are battering in another now! They are old hands at this game, and this is not the first house they have looted. When they do find the preacher he will tell everything he knows, as fast as he can talk."

She drew in her breath sharply, and sat up. The movement was noiseless, but in the instant of intense

silence which followed, we heard below us the sudden sound of struggle, a muffled voice calling for mercy, the shuffling of feet, and the noise of a body being hauled forward across the floor. Then someone ran along the hall, passing just beneath us.

“What have you found, Kelly?” It was Anse’s voice roaring out the question. “Ah! the old fox dug out of his hole, hey! Now see here, you canting old Baptist hypocrite. What kind of a trick is it you are playing on me? Stand him up there boys, against that rail. Stop your howling, or I’ll smash you one in the face. Where did you find the fool, Jack?”

“Locked in a closet yonder; looks like it might be the girl’s room.”

“Locked in?”

“He sure was, an’ no key. We hed to bust in the door ter git at him.”

“He had locked himself thar?”

“I reckon not; leastwise thar want no key thar, an’ none in his pocket. The darn fool is too skeered ter talk yet.”

“Well, I’ll make him, er else thar’ll be a dead preacher in ’bout a minute. I reckon as how I’ll do as much skeering as anyone. Now, Nichols, ye see thet! Whut the devil wus yer doing in thet closet?”

“They — they done put me thar, Anse.”

“They! What do yer mean? Wus thar anyone yere along with ther girl?”

Nichols' voice sounded as though he was being choked, his reply being gasped out.

“Don't do thet, Anse — my God! I ain't done nothing fer yer ter be mad at — I — I just couldn't help bein' whar I wus — let me 'lone a minute, an' I'll tell yer all 'bout it.”

“Go on, then — who wus yere beside the girl when yer cum?”

“A Yankee leftenant, a cavalryman I reckon from ther yaller stripes on his legs.”

“A Yank! Did yer hear the fellar's name?”

“Damn if I'm sure; he's a right good sized man, an' not bad lookin'. Pears to me, now I think of it, she called him Raymond.”

There was a gasping sound as though Anse's hand had closed again heavily on the fellow's throat.

“Raymond! I reckon yer lyin' ter me, Parson. Yer heard tell o' thet feller over in camp, an' ther name stuck. 'Twont be healthy fer yer ter play no game yere.”

“I ain't, Anse. Quit a chokin' me. I never heard tell o' no Yank named Raymond afore. Be thar one 'round yere?”

“Wall, thar was, but I don't reckon thar is now,” doubtfully. “Last I heerd tell o' him he wus over

in Fayette a ridin' like hell fer Charleston. Monte's band picked him up, an' he didn't find this kentry none too healthy fer his line o' business, which was recruitin' — whut's that, Kelly?"

"Better let ther preacher tell his story, Anse. We're losin' a lot o' time; I reckon thar must a bin some kind o' male critter yere; 'taint likely ther girl locked him up alone, an' it don't make no odds whut the Yank's name wus, nohow."

"Go on, Nichols; whut happened? Tell us the whole of it, but make it short."

The preacher drew in a long breath, evidently relieved to have the pressure of Anse's murderous fingers removed from his throat. He sputtered a bit as he began to speak, and there were muffled words we could not distinguish. Occasionally someone of his auditors interrupted with an oath, or exclamation. He spoke faster as he proceeded, as though feeling less fear, and eager to have the task over. Only once or twice did Cowan interject a brief question.

"I came yere as you told me to, but I must hev' rode faster then was expected, fer no one wus yere when I got ter the house. It was stormin' all ther way, an' I wus plum wet through, an' plastered with mud. The hoss was fit ter drap, fer I thought maybe I'd be late, an' we'd cum a kitin'. Thar warn't nary light in ther shebang exceptin' upstairs on the

west side, an' I reckoned as how thet mout likely be ther gal's room. I went clar 'round ter make sure, but thar warn't no other glimmer enywhere. Didn't strike me I had nuthin' ter be afeerd of, with nobody but the young gal et home. I reckoned as how she'd know me, and wouldn't likely make no fuss, afore I could explain how I cum thar, an' I sure wanted ter git inside outer thet cold rain. I didn't know how long it might be 'fore you fellers come. Wall, when I crept up on the front piazza, the furst thing I see was a winder smashed in, an' I got through thar, an' across the room to ther door leadin' inter the hall, afore I saw eny signs of enybody. Then I glimpsed a light in the room opposite, an' seed the gal sittin' in front o' ther fireplace. I didn't know thar wus a soul else in the house, an' thet fire looked so good, I just up an' stepped inter the room afore I thought. Then I see this yere Yank a sittin' at the table eatin'."

"He was in uniform?"

"Sure; wet and muddy as if he hedn't bin inside long either, an' he didn't leave me no time fer ter back out. He hed me covered almost 'fore I see him; but the gal jumped up an' told him who I wus, an' he put back the pistol, an' sat thar while she questioned me right smart."

"Well, what did you tell her?"

“Only 'bout her father being dead at furst. Thet I heerd about it at Lewisburg, an' hed felt it my duty ter bring her the news. I reckon if she hed bin thar alone we'd a got 'long fine tergether, but thet Yankee leftenant wus too smart ter be fooled so easy. I reckon he knew mor'n he let on, fer ther furst thing I knew he wus questionin' me like a blame lawyer, an' a shovin' his gun in my face fer ter make me answer.”

“You damn coward! What did you tell?”

“Honest, Anse, I don't jest know; but I reckon I did spit it most out, fer he'd a killed me if I hadn't.”

“Do you mean to say you told them I was comin' yere ternight, an' goin' fer ter make the girl marry me — you whinin' cur?”

“How could I help it, Anse? I reckon if thet feller hed a pistol et your head you'd a did some talkin'. Maybe he's a recruitin' officer, but he ain't no sorter man ter fool with onct he gits mad.”

“Well, I'd sure like fer ter know who he is. He can't be ther feller what got away from Monte, fer he lit out fer Charleston. How did this yere feller git yere — on horseback?”

“I didn't git sight o' no hoss; thar wus only one four-legged critter in ther barn, an' I reckon as how the girl must hev' rode thet.”

"Say, Anse," broke in the voice of Kelly, "I'll bet this Yank is the one thet wus with Fox, an' got away. He'd hed time 'nough fer ter git this fer on fut."

"But what does he call hisself Raymond fer?"

"Damn if I know — maybe he jest heerd tell of the other feller, an' thought as how he'd git 'long easier under thet name."

"Well, I reckon it won't make much difference whut the cuss' name is if ever I git my hands on him," growled Anse savagely. "Go on, Nichols; how did yer git locked up?"

"I thought as how thar wus a chance ter break away, an' ther Yank an' me we fit like a couple o' wild cats. I reckon maybe I'd a licked ther cuss, if the gal hadn't a stole up behin' an' hit me with some crockery. The next thing I know'd they'd dragged me up stairs yere, shoved me inter that thar closet, an' locked ther door."

"What became of them?"

"Skipped out, I reckon. I never seen nuthing more ov 'em."

Anse must have completely lost his temper, for there was the sound of a blow, and the noise of a falling body, feet shuffling as the others drew back. Then a moment of silence.

"Pick the ol' fool up," said a voice. "Throw

him back into the room thar. Maybe he'll hev sum sense when he wakes up. Kelly, take Jim with yer, an' see if thet hoss is in ther stable yet. If them two left on fut, they ain't gone fur in this storm. Enyhow thar's one thing sure — they ain't a hidin' up yere. Cum on, boys, let's take a 'nother look 'round down below."

We heard their feet on the stairs, and the light, which had streamed up through the crack in the scuttle, faded away, leaving us in utter darkness.

CHAPTER XII

THE RECOGNITION



ALTHOUGH fully satisfied that all the ruffians had left the upper floor, with the exception of the unconscious Nichols, for a few moments neither of us ventured to speak or move. What would the fellows do when they discovered the lady's horse still in the stable? Would they decide we had hastily fled on foot, and scatter widely in search of some trace? There was little hope of their finding any trail to follow in the storm raging without, but they might very reasonably expect to overhaul fugitives on foot by a thorough scouring of nearby roads and fields. Lewisburg alone promised shelter and protection, and there was only one road leading to Lewisburg. Beyond doubt Cowan would send men spurring in that direction, and others probably to scour the adjacent fields as thoroughly as possible in the darkness. But in the meanwhile what should we do? was there any possibility of escape by descending? or would it be safer to remain where we were until the return of daylight? I could reach up, and feel the rafters of the roof overhead, and, now in

the silence, hear the steady downpour of the rain. Our position was far from being a pleasant one, and I could not drive from my mind a haunting fear lest those villains fire the house when finally convinced of our escape. There was, to my mind, no reason why Anse Cowan should refrain from such an act of vandalism. No doubt either he or old Ned had had a hand in the earlier visit to the place, and if there was then anything in the house they desired to obtain possession of it had been attained. Of course he might be induced to spare the property from fire in the expectation that it would some time belong to him; this vague hope, no doubt, underlay the whole affair — the search for papers, the murder of the Major, the present effort to forcibly marry the daughter. All these things formed part of a well-concocted plan, through which the Cowans expected to acquire possession of Harwood's property. The war, and the consequent demoralization of the neighborhood, had given them an opportunity for revenge they were not slow to seize. Hate, the desire for vengeance, the brutal passions engendered by a feud, found ample opportunity now for full expression. Lawlessness ruled supreme in all that section between the Green Briar and the Alleghanies. Of course it would not always be so — the end of the war would bring a return to normal

conditions, but with Harwood dead, his private papers in their possession, his only daughter legally married to Anse, the Cowans would be entrenched beyond any legal attack. What they took with the strong hand, they could hold.

This was the state of affairs as I began to understand them now, piecing this and that together, lying there in the darkness, listening for some sound of guidance from below. I could hear the soft breathing of the girl at my side, but she did not speak or move. She had overheard all that was said; she must also realize fully the object of these men, and the desperation of our position. Would she continue to trust me? to believe in my purpose? or had the words of betrayal spoken by Anse Cowan and Kelly left a sting of suspicion behind? If they had, would I dare to confess the truth, fully reveal my identity, and thus leave the fate of my secret mission in her hands? Her sympathies must naturally be with the Union forces; she would see the issues from the viewpoint of her father. That would have nothing to do with these banditti, but later might greatly interfere with the work to which I had been assigned. I had two duties to perform — to the army, and to this helpless girl; which was paramount if by any chance they clashed? I could not answer, but I did comprehend which came first — I must save Noreen

Harwood from the merciless clutch of Anse Cowan. I must remain with her loyally, until she was safe in the protection of friends. Possibly I could accomplish this, and still retain my secret. She might not have heard, might not have clearly understood what the men said. Their denial that I could be recruiting officer Raymond might not awaken her suspicion at all. She might have been too intent on her own danger to give that a second thought, or have it make the slightest impression on her mind. At least that was the theory on which I must proceed — that she trusted me fully, and would do exactly as I advised.

“Is there any other way out of here, Miss Noreen?” I asked, scarcely above a whisper, “any opening leading to the roof?”

“I have never seen one, though often up here when I was a child.”

“Then our only means of escape is by the ladder, and we dare not venture that until assured those fellows have really left. Do you hear any sound below?”

We both listened in breathless silence, but no noise reached us with any distinctness. I thought I caught the echo of a voice, but it sounded from outside the house — possibly someone yelling a report from the stable.

“Shall I risk exploring?” I asked doubtfully. “There is surely no one on this floor except Nichols, and I judge he has been knocked out for some time. We can hardly wait here for him to recover, and give us free passage. What action do you think we ought to take?”

“I certainly have no desire to remain here longer than is necessary,” she answered calmly, “but I do not believe those men have all left the house. Some may be outside in the storm searching for trace of us, but there are others surely on guard below. Did you hear that? a knife fell on the floor; someone is eating in the dining room.”

“I am going to lift the scuttle; possibly some light may filter up the stairs.”

I was obliged to loosen it by the insertion of my knife blade, yet the clamp yielded with but little noise, and I peered eagerly down the opening. There was a lamp burning in the lower hall, the reflection sufficiently bright to reveal the general situation. No men were visible, nor did I hear any voices in conversation. One thing was certain — the upper hall was completely deserted, for I could see along its entire length. I lifted my head, and glanced back to where the girl remained silent, and motionless. My eyes, long accustomed to the darkness, could distinguish her outlines, even the dim contour

of her face. She sat upright on the rough flooring, apparently regarding me intently.

“Do you find the way left clear?”

“So far as the upper hall is concerned — yes. There is a light burning below, although I can perceive no movement. They may be in the dining room, but I do not believe they will search up here again.”

“You propose then lowering the ladder?”

The tone in which she asked these questions vexed me, her voice somehow sounded lifeless and cold.

“We shall certainly be more comfortably concealed in one of those rooms below,” I answered, endeavoring to speak naturally, “and better able to accept any opportunity for escape which may offer.”

“Yes?” The slight rising inflection stung me. What did her actions mean? Why should she so suddenly assume that tone with me? The sooner I knew the better.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Harwood,” I said quietly, “but I fail to understand why you should speak to me in this manner. You have shown confidence, trust, in my former efforts to serve you, and I am just as eager now to be of service.”

“You mean you wish me to have complete confidence in you?”

“Certainly. I can do nothing otherwise.”

There was an instant of silence, in which her breathing was plainly audible. Beneath the shadow of an uplifted hand I felt that her eyes were upon my face.

"Very well, then," she said finally, her voice more expressive of interest. "It is surely no more than natural that I should desire to know whom I have the honor of talking with."

"But do you not know?"

"No," firmly and decisively. "I accepted you on behalf of the uniform you wore, although I could not clearly comprehend why you felt it necessary to assume the name of a brother officer, and endeavor to deceive me as to your real identity. I thought there might be a worthy reason, and so I pretended a confidence in you which I could not altogether feel. I knew you were not Charlie Raymond; there is no resemblance between you, and your explanation was lame — for there was no other cadet of that name at West Point. You heard what those men said — yet you go on pretending to me; thinking, perhaps, that I failed to understand the meaning of their words. You are the officer they referred to, are you not?"

"Yes; I escaped when Fox's command was attacked."

"You were an officer in Captain Fox's troop?"

“No; I joined him by accident at Hot Springs.”

“Under what name?”

The utter uselessness of attempting to lie was apparent. Her questions were too direct, too straight-forward, for any further evasion. The slightest quibbling now would cost me her friendship forever. If I hesitated, it was scarcely noticeable.

“Under the name,” I replied quietly, “of Charles H. Raymond, Lieutenant Third U. S. Cavalry, on recruiting service.”

“Oh!” the exclamation burst forth in surprise at my frank avowal. “Then you did not make that up merely to deceive me? You had been passing under that name with others. You had taken it for a distinct purpose — a — a military purpose?”

“I took it,” I said slowly, and deliberately, my eyes looking steadily at her, “because I knew such a Federal officer had been detailed to service in this neighborhood.”

She drew in her breath quickly, making a little gesture with one hand.

“Then — then you are a Confederate?”

“Yes.”

“A spy! You are falsely wearing that uniform! Are you — are you a soldier?”

“A sergeant of artillery, Miss Harwood,” I replied, calm and determined now that I had once

made the plunge. "I have done nothing I need be ashamed to confess. If I have taken my life in my hands to serve the cause of the South, it was in obedience to the orders of my superiors."

"Whose orders?"

"General Jackson directly; although Robert E. Lee was present, and gave final instructions."

"To come here secretly, in disguise? for what object?"

"To learn what I could of General Ramsay's forces in this district, and the disposition of the mountain men, and their leaders. There is, in war, nothing dishonorable in such a service. I am doing my duty as a soldier."

Her hands concealed her face, and I could judge nothing as to its expression; whether, or not, my words had any weight with her. She sat motionless, bent slightly forward. At last she said slowly:

"I — I know enough of — of army life to be aware that men are not ordered to such hazardous work — they are asked to volunteer. Only a brave man would assume such a risk; only a man who believed in himself, and his cause. I — I like you better because you have told me. I believe you are honest with me now. I did not know what to do, or what to say before. I knew you were not Raymond, and that you were acting a lie — but could

not guess your purpose. What made it harder to understand," her voice hesitating slightly, "arose because there was something about you so oddly familiar; I — I felt that I ought to recognize your face; that somewhere we had met before — have we?"

"Yes, Miss Noreen; I am Tom Wyatt."

"Why! Why, of course!" the swift expression was one of intense relief. "How stupid of me! Oh, I am so glad that I know." To my surprise she held out both hands impulsively. "Your being a spy doesn't make any difference now that I know who you really are. It is no wonder I did not recognize you — why you were only a boy —"

"Not when you rode by my mother and me on the pike."

"A year ago? I remember; yet I hardly caught a glimpse of you through the dust. You were just a boy when you were here last. Why you had long curls."

"And thought Noreen Harwood the most beautiful little girl I had even seen."

"Oh, indeed; well, you were never nice enough to say so. All I distinctly recall is that you broke my doll, and I declared I would never speak to you again."

"I hope at this time to make amends," I hastened

to say, glad that even such dim memory served to break the ice between us. "Do not let my former rudeness count against me now, Miss Noreen. I appeal for forgiveness most humbly, and would even bring you a new doll."

"My wants are greater now."

"And my desire to please stronger."

She drew in her breath sharply, as though suddenly awakening to the foolishness of such idle exchange of words.

"Why, how ridiculous for us to sit here talking of our boy and girl days. For the moment I had utterly forgotten the peril of our surroundings. Why you — you are in even greater danger than I."

"Oh, no; from all I have seen and heard the Cowans must be in sympathy with the South, or they never would have made the attack on Fox's party, or held Lieutenant Raymond prisoner. I had considered going direct to Anse, revealing my identity, and demanding protection."

Her hands grasped my sleeve.

"No, not that! You do not understand, Tom Wyatt. These men care nothing for the issues of the war. They merely use them to cover up their own lawless deeds, and to assist in working out schemes of revenge. They are neither Federal, nor Confederate; they are robbers, murderers, and thieves.

Is Anse Cowan here tonight for any purpose but his own? You realize what that purpose is."

"I have heard enough to make me certain," I answered. "He would force you into marriage to thus gain control of this property. The killing of Major Harwood was part of the plan."

"You know then of my father's death? You know that report to be true? Why, you said you were with Captain Fox at Hot Springs! Is it so?"

"Yes, Miss Noreen, it is true. I saw your father's body, and that of his servant Tom. I came across the mountains with the man who killed them both. I supposed him to be a scout. He called himself Jem Taylor, and when they first met your father addressed him by that name. They met by appointment at a house a mile south of Hot Springs. Your father said nothing to you of such a man?"

"No; I saw him but for a moment as he passed through Lewisburg on his way east. He was to meet a scout beyond the mountains, but no name was mentioned. What did the man Taylor look like?"

"I described him to Captain Fox, and one of his men, a sergeant, instantly pronounced the fellow to be old Ned Cowan."

"Ned Cowan! Why, that could not be! My father would never have an appointment alone with him. They have been deadly enemies for years."

“That may be true, Miss Noreen. I can only tell you what little I know. Your father might have been deceived; drawn into a trap. He was there apparently by appointment to confer with a man known to him as Taylor. Who Taylor really was I can not say — but he was an enemy, not a friend, of Major Harwood. I do not insist that the fellow was Ned Cowan, but I am sure he belonged to the gang. We trailed him nearly to New River, and had gone into camp amid the mountains when the Cowans attacked us. In my judgment the killing of your father, and the raid on this house tonight, form part of the same plan.”

I do not think she was crying, although her face was buried in her hands. I turned my eyes away, down through the scuttle hole, but nothing moved along the hall below. The house seemed absolutely deserted, but the lamp continued to burn, and yet, even as I felt the strangeness of such intense silence, a door slammed somewhere in the distance, and a gruff voice spoke.

CHAPTER XIII

WAITING THE NEXT MOVE



ANSE — Kelly, are either of you there?"

There was the sound of chairs being pushed hastily back from a table, and rapid steps on the floor.

"Yes; what's wrong? Have you found something?"

"Sure; Bill an' I saw them; they were a tryin' ter git the hoss; but afore either of us could fire, they sorter slipped 'long back o' ther fence, an' got away. It's darker'n hell out thar, an' Bill sed fer me ter cum in yere an' tell yer that if you 'en Kelly wud cut across the road, an' sorter head the cusses off we'd bag the two easy."

"Whar's the rest of ther boys?"

"Ridin' the Lewisburg pike accordin' ter orders, I reckon. Leastwise we ain't seen 'em since yer tol' us ter watch ther stable. Bill an' I can't round them up alone."

"All right, Dave. Where are they *now*?"

"In ther orchard, a creepin' 'long the fence. Bill's followin' 'em up, an' all you got ter do is run 'long

the road an' git ter the corner ahead o' 'em. They can't go no other way."

I caught a glimpse of the two as they crossed the lower hall hurriedly. The lamp flickered in the draft of the opened door, and one fellow swore roughly, as he stumbled over some obstacle. Then the door closed, and the flame steadied. In the silence we could hear again the beating of rain on the roof over head.

"Who do you suppose they could have seen?" she asked.

"Shadows likely enough. Let them hunt. We know now the house is deserted, and can find more comfortable quarters — perhaps even slip away before anyone returns. You will go with me?"

"Of course; I am not afraid of Tom Wyatt."

"You were once, young lady — down by the old mill."

She laughed, as if the suddenly revived memory had driven the seriousness of the present situation from mind.

"When I thought you an Indian? Oh, I have entirely recovered from that fear. I am even going to confess I liked you then."

"Good! and now?"

"That is my secret, sir. Is it not enough to compel me to companion with a rebel spy, without

asking impertinent questions? Let me help you with the ladder."

We passed it down slowly, and carefully, until the lower end rested securely on the floor below. If Nichols had recovered from the effect of the severe blow, he had made no sound, and I had almost forgotten his presence. I drew back, and permitted the lady to descend first, holding the upper supports firmly until her feet touched the floor. It was a struggle for me to force my larger bulk through the narrow opening, but I succeeded finally, and stood beside her. In the brighter light I could perceive more clearly the expression of the girl's face, and realized the friendliness of her eyes. My frank confession had won me her confidence; no matter where her sympathy might be in this war struggle my allegiance to the cause of the South was no serious barrier between us; even the fact that I was masquerading there in a stolen uniform, and under an assumed name, had not greatly changed her trust in an old playmate. My heart beat faster to this knowledge, yet, in some way, although I rejoiced, the recognition brought with it a strange embarrassment. To her I seemed to be only the boy Tom Wyatt, grown up. She met me in the same open-hearted, careless manner of our childhood — as though it was only yesterday when we played together. But

to me she was no longer the girl who ran and laughed — she had changed into a woman; and my heart throbbed to the glance of her eye, my blood stirred to the touch of her hand. The very ease with which she appeared to resume the old careless relationship brought to me a pang of regret. I was not a boy, nor content that she should regard me from that standpoint.

“It sounds as though the storm was harder than ever,” she said. “Where shall we go?”

“My choice would be to hide in one of these rooms, for the present, at least. We could scarcely hope to get the horse out of the stable unseen, and, even if we did, we would be likely to ride into some of the gang.”

“But they will return to the house.”

“Before they leave — yes; but it is hardly probable they will search up here again. Anse will be in ill-humor enough when he decides we have really escaped, but will never imagine that our hiding place is in the house. They will give up by daylight, and then the way will be clear.”

“And where will you go?”

“Why,” in surprise. “I could not leave you alone until I placed you in the care of friends.”

“At Lewisburg, you mean?”

“If that is where you wish to go.”

Her eyes met mine frankly, but with an expression in their depths I failed to fathom.

“Not wearing that uniform,” she said quietly, “or under the name of Lieutenant Raymond. Do not misunderstand. There is friendship between us — personal friendship, the memory of the past, a knowledge of the intimacy between your father and mine. More, I am grateful to you for the service you have been to me this night; nor do I hold it against you that you risk your life in the cause for which you fight. But I am Union, Tom Wyatt, and I cannot help you in your work, nor protect you. When daylight comes I am going to say good-bye — and forget that I have even seen you.”

“But,” I protested, “why could we not part, if we must, at Lewisburg, after I know you are safe?”

“There are Federal troops at Lewisburg. They know me, and their commander is aware of my acquaintance with the officer whose name you have assumed.”

“Then you knew me for a fraud from the very first moment of our meeting?”

“Yes; I knew you were not the man you claimed to be. I said nothing, for I wished to learn your object.”

“Yet, in a measure, at least, you trusted me?”

The eyes into which I gazed smiled slightly.

“Hardly that, perhaps. Your face is an honest one, and there was a vague familiarity about it which made me determined to learn who you were. Besides — well really, I had no choice; I was alone here, and helpless.”

“True; yet you have not confessed all.”

“All! What else?”

“My guess is you possessed a strong desire to protect Lieutenant Raymond.”

“Oh, indeed!” she laughed, but her eyes fell. “That might have been an added motive — yes. I naturally desired to discover, if possible, why anyone should pretend to be he. My interest was — was not personal, however; it was patriotic.”

“But you are friendly?” I persisted, unable to resist the impulse. “This lieutenant is not a mere acquaintance?”

“I feel under no obligation to answer that question,” she returned, her cheeks flushed. “There is no reason why you should ask. My interest in the Union cause is sufficient explanation. I am not a little girl, any more.”

“Nor am I a mere boy, Miss Noreen. We have met here as man and woman,” I said earnestly. “Our past is a bond between us; to me a pleasant memory — but I do not rely upon it for the future. Even although I am a Confederate soldier, I want

you to consider me a personal friend — one in whom you feel an interest equal at least to that shown Lieutenant Raymond.”

“Why I do,” her eyes opening widely. “It is for your own protection I refuse your escort to Lewisburg. I am a traitor to my flag not to take you there, and surrender you a prisoner. If — if I did not care I would.”

“You mean memory of the boy restrains you?”

She hesitated a moment, her lips parted, a frown wrinkling her forehead.

“No,” she acknowledged slowly, as though the thought had just dawned. “That memory is not even vivid. I — I believe you to be a man I shall be glad to know — Hark! that was a shot!”

“Yes, and another; they sound to the west of the house.”

“In the orchard, beyond the stable. Can there really be someone hiding there?”

“They are certainly firing at something — there speaks another rifle farther south. Those fellows will be back presently, and we must be out of their way. What room is that beyond the chimney?”

“It was used by the housekeeper. Do you know where Parson Nichols was left?”

“In the room at the head of the stairs; why yes, your room. Could they have killed the man?”

I pushed open the door, which stood slightly ajar, and looked in. Nichols had partially lifted himself by clinging to the bed, and his eyes met mine. The marks of the savage blow with which Cowan had floored him, were plainly evident, and the man appeared weak and dazed. Yet he instantly recognized me, and crouched back in terror. His return to consciousness, his knowledge of our presence in the house, only meant increased danger. Anse and his followers might not search again for us, but if they returned they would certainly examine into his condition, and he would immediately confess all he knew. The preacher might feel no eager desire to aid Cowan after the rough treatment received, but fear would compel him to speak, and there was no love in his heart for either of us which would restrain his lips. Our only safety therefore lay in having him completely in our power. If those fellows found him gone, they would naturally suppose he had recovered consciousness, and escaped in the darkness. They would scarcely care enough to search the house. I stepped into the room, and gripped his collar.

“Stand on your feet, man! Oh, yes, you can; you’re a little groggy yet, no doubt, but with strength enough for that. Come; I’ll hold you. Now, out into the hall. Miss Harwood, may I trouble you to open that door — yes, the housekeeper’s room;

we'll hide ourselves in there. By Jove, that sounds like a regular volley!"

I pushed the man forward, and flung him down on the bed, still retaining my grip on his collar.

"Not a move, or a sound, Nichols! Attempt to betray us, and your life is not worth the snap of a finger. Miss Harwood."

"Yes."

"Close the door, and lock it; is there a bolt?"

"A strong iron one, but it seems rusty."

I stepped across, and forced it into the socket with a sharp click. The same instant a vivid flash of red lit up the whole interior, the light glaring in through the unshaded windows, and reflecting from the walls. Nichols started up with a little cry of terror, but I forced him back.

"It is not the house," I said sternly. "They must have fired the stable. Keep down out of sight. Miss Noreen creep across to that nearest window and take a glance out — be careful that no one sees you. I'll keep guard over our preacher friend."

She left us quietly, crouching close against the wall, until she could safely peer out from behind the fold of a chintz curtain. This so shadowed her face that I could distinguish merely its dim outline. The glow from without reddened the entire room. Nichols began to groan, and mutter, but whether the words

were those of prayer, or not, I was uncertain. That the fellow's brain tottered on the brink of total collapse was evident, and I was too fearful he might create alarm to desert my guard. Eager to learn what had occurred I called across to the girl:

"Is it the stable, Miss Noreen?"

"Yes," with a quick glance backward. "The whole west end is ablaze; I think it was fired in two places."

"Do you see anything of the men?"

"Not clearly, except two or three passing back and forth between the house and the stable. I think there are horses picketed beyond in the orchard, but am not sure — yes, there are men there with them. The fire, as it blazes up, gives me a better view."

"Can you tell how many?"

"No — they form merely a shadow under the trees where the light streams; occasionally one moves, and stands out separate enough to reveal himself as a man. I cannot really tell anything about them — but — but I didn't suppose Anse Cowan had so many with him, did you?"

"Why, really I cannot tell, for I have no conception either way. There must have been a dozen altogether in the house, and doubtless others were on guard without. Hasn't it ceased storming?"

"Yes; I wonder what time it is; why I actually

believe the sky is becoming lighter in the east already."

She stared out intently, and then sank to her knees.

"Come over here quick! they are getting ready for something."

I swept my eyes over Nichols, who lay motionless, his arms folded across his face. To my mind the fellow was acting a part, and was not half as badly injured as he pretended to be. However, he could do us no great harm at present, and I stole silently across the room, and knelt beside her. She held the curtain aside, leaving just space enough for my eyes. For an instant the glow of the burning building blinded me, and intensified the surrounding darkness. I shadowed my eyes with my hand.

"Where are the men you saw? To the left?"

"Yes — back under the trees, close to the first negro cabin; see! just where I point."

Once located I could perceive the shadowy outline, which grew more distinct as I gazed. There were men there beyond doubt; it seemed to me twenty or thirty, although it was impossible to judge the number. But the shadow seemed to be disintegrating. Even as my eyes focused it, a section moved to the right, and then another swung into the open, circling along the orchard fence.

"There is a slew of them," I muttered unthink-

ingly. "Anse meant to have company at his wedding."

"Oh, hush!" her hand caught my sleeve. "They — they are coming back to the house now."

CHAPTER XIV

A MARRIAGE BY DURESS



THE girl was evidently right, although the path the party followed swung so far to the left I could see little of them from the window. The fence concealed their number, but there was a dozen, at least, and they moved steadily, the red flames gleaming on what I took to be gun barrels. They disappeared behind a low shed, merging almost mysteriously in its shadow. I heard no orders given, no sound of a voice. The silently moving figures seemed more like specters than men. As I strove vainly to discover where they had vanished I perceived the faint tinge of gray across the eastern sky. Daylight was coming; the gang meant to search the house again, perhaps fire it as they had the stable, and then ride away before the Federal garrison at Lewisburg could receive the alarm. The light of the fire would certainly be perceived there by the sentries, and reported. Perhaps already the troopers were in their saddles — but they would be too late. I turned away from the window to perceive Nichols sitting up on the edge of the bed.

“What’s afire?” he asked.

“The stable,” I answered crossing the room, “and, as near as I can make out the whole gang is headed back this way to finish their job. Get down in the corner, where you cannot be seen from the windows. Oh, yes you can; you are not so badly hurt. Miss Noreen.”

She did not answer, but came to where I was standing, gliding swiftly along in the shadow of the wall. The light of the blazing stable illumined the face upturned questioningly to mine.

“What do you suppose those men will do?”

“That is all guesswork. The firing of the stable may have been an accident; but if it was done purposely then I believe they will also apply a torch to the house before they leave. But I am not so afraid of that, as I imagine the cowards will ride away so soon as they are assured the fire is well started. They will fear the approach of soldiers from Lewisburg. Of what does that garrison consist?”

“Two troops of cavalry — but what is it you most fear?”

“That the search without has convinced Cowan that we are still hidden in the house. Anything else is preferable to having you fall into the hands of that villain. He came here with one object in

view; and will not give up while there is a hope left. Is there any other place better than this in which to hide?"

She shook her head.

"Well, then we must fight it out here if they come; you have your revolver — ah! the squad is already below; listen!"

We stood side by side, scarcely breathing, close to the bolted door. The flames of the burning stable were dying down, yet there was sufficient light to render every object in the room plainly visible. Intent as I was on every slight sound below and without, I kept my eyes on Nichols, seated dejectedly in one corner. Feet tramped noisily back and forth in the lower hall, and the sound of voices reached us, the words indistinguishable. There was an echo of splintered wood, the crash of dishes, and a loud laugh. The fellows seemed to be looting the kitchen and pantry, destroying whatever they could not use. Suddenly there arose a sound of smashing glass at the front of the house, and the tinkling of a piano as if some rough hand swept across the keys. Noreen pressed closer, lifting her eyes in appeal.

"They — they are searching the house," she whispered, her voice shaking, "and — looting it. Do you hear that? they are even tearing the carpet from the floor. Some of them will come up here."

“I am afraid so — but you must not lose your nerve. We shall have to fight!”

“Fight? yes; but what use?” and she grasped my arm with both hands. “Why — why they are ten to one, and there is no chance for us to outwit them. Do not think me a fool or a hysterical girl — it — it is not that! I — I would not be so afraid, only for that man. I cannot fall into his power. I will kill myself first! You do not know Anse Cowan; but I do; he is a dirty, foul, cruel dog; I would rather die than have his hands touch me. I hate and despise him; he is an incarnate brute — and — and he is here after me!”

“Hush,” I urged, holding her tightly, her slight form trembling. “Do not let go yet; they may not even come up the stairs.”

“But they will,” she insisted. “I tell you I know the man. He — he swore he would marry me two years ago; he told me so, and I laughed at him. He stopped my father on the road, held a rifle to his head, and boasted that some day he would make me pay his debts. This is no mere incident of war — it is revenge! I — I would not be frightened but for that — that awful alternative. Tell me — tell me what to do!”

She stared pleadingly into my face, but, reading no answer there to her wild appeal, sank to her knees,

and buried her face in her hands. All that was strong about the girl seemed swept away by sudden, uncontrollable terror — by dread of Anse Cowan. While there appeared to be some hope of escape her courage had sustained her, but now, all at once, it gave way entirely, leaving her in a perfect panic of fear. I realized fully the nature of this threat which had broken her spirit. She was no less womanly, no less worthy respect and love, in her shrinking of terror. It was not death she dreaded, nor any physical danger — it was dishonor; the contaminating touch of a brutal hand, the foul insult of a dirty cur. But what could I say? What could I do? I stood helpless, uncertain, unable even to find words of encouragement. No thought, no plan occurred to me — only to defend her while I lived. A hoarse, strange voice roared out an order, seemingly from the very foot of the stairs.

“That’s enough of that, Samuels! Here, take your men up above. Be lively now, and don’t let a rat get away.”

The girl lifted her head; then got to her feet clinging to the bed-post. I could see the glitter of a pistol in her hand. A thought swept through my brain — so daring, so reckless, I gasped at the mere wildness of the suggestion. Yet it might answer; it might succeed! But would she consent; even in

her desperation, in the extreme of her terror, would she grasp at such a straw? There was nothing else — not another chance. This might not be one — yet it would surely serve to delay; it would place me in between her and Anse Cowan. He could only reach her over my dead body; for the moment, at least, it would block his plan. She could not legally marry him, if she was *once my wife!* Of course the man might not hesitate in his mad anger, even at murder — yet again it was possible that my uniform would save me — the troops at Lewisburg were not far away; fear of them might make the villain cautious. It was a chance — a desperate, reckless chance — and no more! But the thought — crazy as it was — flashed instantaneously through my brain; took possession of me. Only the girl whose eyes just then met mine —

“I — I have thought of one way,” I said eagerly, the words coming forth almost incoherent. “That is if you will listen to what I propose. There is nothing else feasible so far as I can see. They — they are in the front rooms now — hear them! We haven’t a moment to lose. Will you — will you consent to marry me?”

She shrank back a step, staring at me with wide-opened eyes, breathing heavily.

“Marry! marry you?” she faltered wildly.

“Why what can you mean! I — I do not understand!”

“Of course not — the conception is wild, impractical, perhaps. It must seem so to you — yet listen. It is the one way left open to save you from Anse Cowan. You can trust me? You do trust me, do you not?”

“Ye-es — but —”

“This is no time to question. They are coming here now, those fellows with Anse Cowan at their head. You know what for. Whatever the real object may be some among them have not hesitated at murder for its attainment — they will not spare you. The question is not do you wish to marry me; but do you trust me more than you do Anse Cowan? Do you hear them breaking down those doors at the front of the house? There, by the sound, someone is already in the room next to this. Listen! it will be a form only — I am not conceited enough to believe you desire me for your husband. But you know who I am; you have confidence in my honor, and I offer you this opportunity to escape from that brute. He cannot marry you if you are already my wife —”

“He — he could kill you.”

“Yes, there are enough of them; but that might happen anyway. No doubt it would, for otherwise

I should fight to the end. I do not think being your husband will add in the least to my danger — and it will possibly, legally, protect you.”

“ But how can I? Will it be legal?”

“ Noreen, don’t stop to argue, or doubt,” I urged, grasping her hand in eagerness. “ We haven’t time. Listen to those voices in the hall! Of course it will be legal — Nichols is an ordained minister, and no license is required. I shall never attempt to hold you, Noreen, and any court will set you free the moment you tell the story. The one, the only thing, for you to consider now, is escape from Anse Cowan.”

“ You do this to — to save me?”

“ To keep you from falling helplessly into the clutches of a beast — tell me yes! My God, girl, there they are now trying the door! Answer — will you?”

“ Yes — yes, Tom Wyatt — ”

With one leap past her I had Nichols by the collar, the muzzle of my revolver at his head. A heavy foot crashed against the locked door, and a voice without gave utterance to an oath.

“ Marry me to this girl,” I commanded sternly. “ Come now, not a word; don’t wait to ask a question. Noreen, take my hand — ”

“ Open up in there or we’ll break down the door!” came hoarsely from the hallway.

My eyes never left Nichols' face. What he read of threat I know not, but his lips began to stumble through the form, though I could scarcely distinguish a word. His face was gray with terror, and I dare not look aside at the silent girl — only I vaguely realized that the hand held in mine trembled, and once, when she had to speak, the two words uttered were almost a sob.

Never surely was there a stranger marriage in all the world. The dying embers of the stable fire shot red gleams of flame over us through the unshaded windows, giving to Nichols a ghastly look, and glowing on the steel barrel of the revolver I held poised at his head. His voice faltered and broke, and clotted blood rendered hideous one side of his face, while his hands shook as if with palsy. All the sneaking coward in him was manifest. Outside a dozen voices roared, one rising gruff above the others shouting orders. Once a single shot crashed through the upper panel of the door and broke the glass of a window opposite. The girl, startled, reeled against me, and the preacher stopped, gasping for breath.

"No firing, you fool!" roared a deep voice angrily. "We don't want any dead ones — beat down the door!"

"Go on!" I ordered grimly, and thrust the black

muzzle hard against his cheek. The preacher choked, but the usual words of the ritual — sounding almost like mockery — dropped mechanically from his tongue.

“And now I pronounce you man and wife, and whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. Amen.”

She gave vent to a little sobbing cry, half stifled in her throat, and shrank away from me. I knew that her face was buried in her hands, yet had no time to look that way, or utter a word. Rifle butts were crashing in the panels of the door; I could perceive already dim figures revealed through the jagged openings made in the light wood, a vista of faces, a gleam of weapons.

“Hit lower down!” yelled the same gruff voice of command. “There is a bolt that holds fast — reach in Saunders!”

“Get back — beyond the bed,” I called, pushing her behind me, and bracing myself for the first shock. The door gave, sagging aside on its hinges, and half falling inward, and through the opening men tumbled forward, carbines gripped in their hands. The red light gleamed ghastly across their faces, and revealed — the blue uniform of Federal cavalry.

CHAPTER XV

BEFORE LIEUTENANT RAYMOND



HE headlong rush stopped in startled amazement at sight of us, and I stood there staring at them, unable to speak, my revolver lowered. In that instant of pause, an officer thrust the men aside and faced me, sword in hand.

“What does this mean, sir? Who are you?” he questioned, sweeping his glance over my uniform, and then beyond me at the two others.

“I would ask the same question,” I returned, not yet assured as to who I confronted, and suspecting some trick. “We believed ourselves attacked by guerrillas. Are you soldiers?”

“Well, rather,” with a short, grim laugh. “These are Pennsylvania cavalymen. My name is Raymond, and I demand to know, first of all, where you got possession of that Third U. S. Cavalry uniform.”

Perhaps in his excitement he had not really recognized her before; but these words were scarcely out of his mouth when the lady stood beside me, facing him. I caught one swift flash of her eyes as

though warning me to silence. Whatever of fear she had formerly felt seemed to have left her in this crisis, for she stood erect, her cheeks flushed, her eyes frankly meeting those of the surprised officer.

“You will, however, recognize me, Lieutenant,” she said pleasantly, and extended her hand, “and, if you will listen, I think I can clear up the mystery.”

“Miss — Miss Harwood,” he murmured slightly embarrassed, but still belligerent, his glance wandering from her face to mine. “Certainly — we hoped to find you here. It was to rescue you we came — at least it was that hope which led me to request the sending of troops, and to accompany them. This outrage has been committed, I believe, by Cowan’s gang, and this man here —”

“Is my friend,” she interrupted quietly. “Lieutenant Raymond, if you will kindly order your men to retire, I will gladly explain his presence in the house.”

“You wish to speak to me alone?”

“Not necessarily; but I certainly prefer greater privacy than this. You are in command?”

“No; Captain Whitlock is below.” He turned toward the crowd blocking the doorway, and I grasped the opportunity to breathe a hasty word of warning into the ear of Nichols. The girl never glanced again at either of us.

“Take the men back into the hall, Sergeant,” the Lieutenant ordered, “and look through whatever rooms have not been visited. Request Captain Whitlock to join me here.”

We waited motionless, the lieutenant’s hand on the butt of his revolver, as though he half suspected treachery. Twice he endeavored to open conversation with the lady, but her response was not encouraging, and he evidently did not feel safe except with his eyes on me. The sight of the uniform I wore perplexed and angered him; he would have greatly enjoyed the privilege of going for me rough-shod, and was restrained only by the presence of the lady. She stood quietly between us, her lips firmly set, and I thought was struggling to retain control of herself, and grasp quickly some explanation of my presence. I could perceive only the contour of her face, but Raymond fronted me, a tall, well proportioned fellow, with incipient mustache, black and curled at the points; a rather long face, and eyes sternly serious. There was about him an appearance of force — a bit of a bully I should say — and his uniform was new, and carefully fitted.

A man stood in the doorway, bowing, his mild blue eyes surveying us nervously. He sported a light beard, closely trimmed, the top of his head scarcely reaching to the lieutenant’s shoulder. Miss Noreen

greeted him with a welcoming smile, and he stepped gallantly forward, bending low as he accepted her hand.

“So pleased, so delighted, Miss Harwood to find you safe and well. We were, indeed, greatly worried at the thought of your being here alone,” he exclaimed, a slight lisp in his voice. “You have not suffered, I trust?”

“Not seriously, Captain Whitlock; the guerrillas were outwitted —”

“Ah! do not attempt to explain, I beg. We understand what you have passed through, as we have captured two of the villains. You sent for me, Lieutenant Raymond?”

“Yes, sir, I did,” the younger officer’s expression exhibiting clearly the contempt he felt for his superior. “I preferred that you decide what shall be done with this fellow,” pointing a finger at me. “Miss Harwood vouches for him, but I fail to understand how he comes to be in the uniform of my regiment.”

The captain fitted a pair of glasses to his eyes and surveyed me with care.

“Why, bless me, so he is,” he ejaculated, “and you never saw him before?”

“No, and there is not another third U. S. cavalryman west of the Alleghanies.”

The girl laughed, and laid her hand on Whitlock's arm.

"I told Lieutenant Raymond that I would explain fully," she said, pretending to be amused. "But I failed to understand then what it was which had so aroused his suspicion. So it is the uniform my friend wears?"

Raymond did not answer, but the captain bowed respectfully.

"As to that I must assume all responsibility," she went on quietly, "as I furnished it."

"You!" there was a sarcastic sneer in the lieutenant's surprise exclamation. "Why should you have in your possession a uniform of the Third Regulars?"

"I did not," she answered sweetly, but looking at Whitlock. "That uniform belonged to my cousin, an officer of the Third Kentucky."

Raymond uttered a smothered expression, stared an instant at her slightly averted face, and then, with one stride forward, swung me to the light.

"See here, Captain Whitlock," he exclaimed indignantly. "I cannot conceive what object Miss Harwood may have in desiring to protect this man, but this is not the uniform of any volunteer regiment."

"Do I understand, Lieutenant, that you dare ques-

tion my word?" she asked proudly, her eyes gazing straight into his. "I am unaccustomed, sir, to such treatment."

"Wait a moment, Raymond," broke in the captain. "There is no doubt of Miss Harwood's loyalty. Let us hear her explanation first. You say, Miss Harwood, you know this man? that he is a friend? May I ask his name?"

"Surely; I only desire an opportunity to answer any question. He is Thomas Wyatt, the son of the late Judge Wyatt, whose home was on the ridge yonder. We were children together."

"A rebel?"

"Really I never thought to ask," carelessly. "I was too glad to have his protection. We — we spoke only of our childhood days together, still I gathered the impression that Mr. Wyatt had never joined either side, and was merely here to look after his property. Of course he can explain all that."

"But how came he to be dressed in that uniform?" burst in Raymond.

"Will you be courteous enough to permit me to tell you? I have endeavored twice already to fully explain. Mr. Wyatt came here in midst of the storm last night. He had found his own home destroyed, and this was the nearest shelter to be found. He supposed the house deserted, and merely

sought protection until morning. How I chanced to be here you gentlemen both know, and that matter requires no explanation. Mr. Wyatt arrived with his clothing muddy, and soaked with rain. I gave him the only change to be found in the house — a uniform belonging originally to a cousin of mine, Lieutenant Anton Harwood, Third Kentucky Cavalry."

"But this is not the uniform worn by volunteer troops. Captain Whitlock, I insist —"

"Really, Lieutenant Raymond," the girl said, fronting him, her eyes sparkling, "this is becoming most tiresome. What do I care what uniform it is! I have told you where it came from, how it chanced to be there, and the reason it was worn by this man. I cannot be expected to know all the petty distinctions of the service."

"But surely," spoke up the captain, plainly bewildered, "the suit he wore when he came can be produced. You know where that is?"

"I know where it was," she answered coolly. "Hanging before the fireplace in the dining-room. However I cannot guarantee that it remains there now — this house has been gutted by Cowan's guerrillas, and, from the sound, your own men were none too careful."

Whitlock fiddled with the tassel of his sword,

evidently far from satisfied himself, yet unwilling to make final decision unaided.

"I hardly know just what to do," he confessed reluctantly. "Ordinarily, you know, a lady's word would be sufficient, but somehow, I — I — well this looks just a little queer. What do you think, Lieutenant?"

"That the fellow ought to be taken before Major Hawes, and made to explain what purpose brought him here. I have no desire to question Miss Harwood; indeed, I am perfectly willing to accept her statement. But this man is not a civilian — he is a soldier; he has had military training. He should be made to account for himself, sir." The speaker's eyes fell upon the preacher, huddled back in the corner, now clearly revealed by the gray daylight which was stealing in through the windows. "Hullo! here seems to be yet another specimen we have overlooked. Who are you?"

Nichols shuffled forward, looking woe-begone and miserable, his cheek disfigured by Cowan's blow, sneak and coward written all over him. His shifting eyes met mine, and he must have read in my gaze a threat he dare not ignore. Twice his mouth opened and closed before he could make words issue.

"One of Cowan's gang?"

"God be praised — no. Made to serve that

human fiend by force. I am a minister of the Gospel."

"You!" the lieutenant burst into a laugh. "By Jove, you fit the part. Whitlock, did you ever hear of the fellow?"

The captain rubbed his glasses.

"Are you the Baptist preacher at Cane Ridge?" he asked doubtfully.

"For twenty years I have ministered to that congregation; the young woman can vouch for my labor."

"Then, I presume you are also acquainted with this fellow?" questioned Raymond impatiently.

Nichols turned his glance again in my direction, but his gray face was devoid of interest.

"I have no knowledge of the young man," he asserted solemnly, "but I knew the old Judge well. The resemblance is strong, and I have no doubt but he is a son. The father was a Christian, and a gentleman."

"And a rebel, I presume?"

"Judge Wyatt died before the breaking out of the war, sir, but was known throughout these parts as a Unionist."

There was a silent pause, Whitlock fumbling at his eye-glasses, Raymond, a perplexed frown on his face, staring first at Nichols, and then at me, as

though more than half convinced he was being made a fool of. The girl had seated herself in a chair, and was leaning forward, her face hidden. The lieutenant turned and strode across the room, glancing out the window; then back again.

"Well, we cannot remain here discussing the matter," he said tartly. "If we do we may have a real fight on our hands before we are safely back in Lewisburg." He planted himself squarely in front of me. "See here, it is time you did some talking. You haven't opened your mouth yet."

"There has been no occasion," I replied pleasantly. "The others have told all you need to know without my even being questioned."

"I have a mind to search you," he retorted, completely losing his temper.

"At your pleasure, Lieutenant," I spoke coldly enough, although there was a catch in my throat at sudden memory of the paper I bore containing his name. "And there is no guessing what you might find in Lieutenant Harwood's uniform."

We were still looking defiantly at each other's eyes, and it began to occur to me that his evident dislike must have some other basis than a mere suspicion that I might be a Confederate spy. Did it arise rather because of my apparent friendliness with Noreen Harwood, and her swift words of defense?

Could there be a personal motive urging this young West Pointer to determine my guilt? The suspicion that this might be the real reason for his conduct had scarcely flashed across my mind when a trooper appeared in the open doorway, saluted, and said something in a low tone to Whitlock. I failed to catch the words spoken, but heard the captain answer:

“Certainly, Corporal, have him come up at once.”

The soldier disappeared down the hall, and the lieutenant stepped back across the room, bending his head to whisper something privately into Whitlock's ear. My eyes followed his movement, and then sought the face of the girl; she sat motionless, the long lashes shading her eyes, the only visible sign of excitement the swift rise and fall of her bosom. Then a man came hastily into the room through the opened door. My heart leaped into my throat at sight of him — he was Captain Fox.

CHAPTER XVI

A PRISONER



HE captain was hatless, and a bloody handkerchief was wound about his head; his uniform was torn and black with mud. He saw Whitlock first, and gripped his hand warmly, his glance straying from the face of the little captain to the other occupants of the room.

“Gad, but it is good to see a blue uniform again,” he exclaimed heartily. What was the row here, Fred — some guerrilla work? Ah! by Jove!” his eyes brightening as he recognized me. “Raymond, I am glad to see you again,” and he strode forward, his lips smiling, his hand held out. “Old Ned swore to me you were dead, but the sergeant said you got away at the first rush. Not even a scratch — hey — ”

“Just a moment, please,” and the interested lieutenant interrupted him by a hand on the shoulder. “I believe we have never met before, but I presume you are Captain Fox?”

The latter turned, a trifle indignant at the other’s manner.

“I am; what of it?”

“Only I am naturally somewhat interested in your identification of this fellow. To us he has claimed the name of Wyatt, but you address him as Raymond. What Raymond did he represent himself to be?”

Fox stared about in surprise at the faces surrounding him, scarcely able to collect his scattered wits.

“Why,” he answered, as though half in doubt of his own words, “Lieutenant Charles H. Raymond, Third Cavalry, on recruiting service. I—I met him at Hot Springs, and he showed me his papers. Isn’t— isn’t he all right?”

“Well, you can draw your own conclusion,” returned the lieutenant, his thin lips curled in a sneer, “for I am Raymond, Third Cavalry. This man is a rebel spy.”

Escape was impossible; I knew that, for I had considered the chances. Both Whitlock and the lieutenant—the latter with revolver drawn—stood between me and the windows. The hall without was thronged with troopers, and, although I might attain the open door, that would be the end of it. I saw Noreen rise to her feet, her startled face turned toward me, but I held my nerves firm, and managed to smile.

“I expect the jig is up, gentlemen,” I acknowl-

edged quietly, determined they should get as little comfort out of me as possible. "I know when I have played my last card."

"Is your name really Wyatt?"

"It is; I am a sergeant in the Staunton Horse Artillery."

"And Miss Harwood — she knew you, as she said, by that name?"

"She did; I was born in this county, and we were children together. If she has attempted to protect me from arrest, it has been because of no disloyalty, but a womanly desire to assist an old friend."

Raymond was far from satisfied, suspiciously glancing from my face to where she stood, white-lipped and silent.

"There is nothing else between you?" he asked roughly. "Do you mean to say she told that story of her cousin's uniform merely because of a girlhood friendship?"

"I am unable to say, sir."

"I hardly think, Lieutenant," broke in Whitlock, suddenly realizing his authority. "It is necessary to ask such questions now. The man confesses himself a spy, and a court-martial will probe into this matter. We must remember the young lady is the daughter of Major Harwood."

"And as Major Harwood's daughter," she said

gravely, standing before me, "I desire to be heard, and to answer this gentleman's question. I sought to save Sergeant Wyatt because of our early friendship, and also because of the special service he has rendered me during the past night. I know nothing of his purpose here, but — but I hold him friend whatever may be his uniform."

The lieutenant bowed, hat in hand.

"I intended no criticism of your motives, but a soldier must perform his duty. Under whose orders are you here, Wyatt?"

"Those of General Jackson, sir."

"Ah! the old fox is casting his eyes this way for his new campaign. What were your orders?"

"I refuse to answer."

"No? Well, Ramsay will get a reply out of you!"

"I hardly think so, sir. You hang spies, but do not torture them."

"True enough," and Whitlock stepped to the door. "Sergeant, bring a file of men, and take charge of this prisoner. There is nothing to detain us longer. We have extra horses, Captain Fox, and you will ride with us as far as Lewisburg; Miss Harwood, I presume you have no desire to remain here alone — indeed, I could not permit it. Better bind the fellow's hands, Harper; search him first for weapons,

and whatever papers he may carry. Mount him on that old artillery horse, and wait for us.”

Raymond watched the proceedings carefully, taking my credentials as a Federal recruiting officer from the hands of the sergeant, and reading them over with a grim smile. I gave small heed to the glance of satisfaction with which he regarded me, and only ventured to look once toward the girl, as the soldiers roughly bound my hands. She had turned away, and was staring out of the open window. With lips pressed tightly together I marched out into the hall closely surrounded by the guard, my thought less concerned with my own fate than with her feeling toward me. Suddenly the truth revealed itself to my mind that I loved the woman I had so strangely married.

It is indeed odd how the human mind works, and now this new discovery completely eclipsed every other consideration. The thought of possible escape, of any means of defense, never occurred to me. All my memory retained was that last glimpse of her slender figure at the window, and the silhouette of her averted face. What was her thought of me? Why had she endeavored so bravely to open a way for my escape? She had not even hesitated at quick invention at falsehood in my behalf, fearlessly facing her questioners, risking her very reputation in hope of

protecting me. Could it have been merely from a sense of gratitude for the small service I had rendered her? This was hard to conceive; yet it was even harder to convince myself that she really cared — that her swift sacrifice of self had been other than the impulse of a moment. Why, really, she almost had reason to hate me for what had occurred. I had practically forced her into marriage, needlessly, uselessly. She might even be justified in believing I realized the truth, and was guilty of a cowardly deceit. My memory of her in the past was that of a proud, headstrong girl, possessing a quick temper, careless of whom she hurt. I had never thought she even liked me, or valued my friendship, and this adventure was far more liable to arouse hatred than affection. She was of a nature to resent the unfair advantage I had taken, and declare war. In the moment of her first surprise she had sprung to my defense, but as soon as she could consider the conditions, her whole nature would turn against me — even now the feeling of disgust had come. She had turned coldly away, hating the very sight of me — staring out of the window until I should disappear, dreading lest I prove cur enough to boast of our relationship. Well, the lady need not fear that. Nichols might tell the story, but it would never find utterance on my lips. And it would soon be over

with, blotted out. My fate would be swiftly and surely settled — a drumhead court-martial at Lewisburg, a verdict of guilty, and a firing squad at dawn. The remedy was simple and effective. No one need ever know, for the preacher's lips could be easily closed. And perhaps Lieutenant Raymond — Bah! my teeth clinched angrily at thought of him, and I tramped on down the stairs to the gruff order of the sergeant.

There were three other prisoners, sallow faced, roughly dressed mountaineers, one wounded in the arm, but I was kept separated from them with a special guard. The day was gloomy, with clouded skies, and the road so muddy the horses stood fetlock deep. Within ten minutes the entire command was in saddle, and moving slowly northward. The lieutenant rode in my rear for the first mile, watchful and suspicious; I could hear his voice issuing orders, but cared nothing as to what precautions were taken. The faint hope of some possible escape was beginning to dawn on my mind, but I realized the futility of any attempt then — a way might open at Lewisburg if the guards grew careless, but the slow moving horse under me, limping painfully with each step, was proof positive that any effort made now to break away would prove utterly useless. Noreen was riding in advance of the column between the two

captains. A gray circular cape concealed her slender form, but I could observe the frequent turning of her head as she apparently conversed vivaciously with her attentive escorts. After we reached the crossroads Raymond spurred his horse forward and joined them, evidently convinced that my guard was sufficiently vigilant, although he stopped in passing to test the knot which bound my hands behind the saddle. It was an insolent act, but I gave no outward sign of resentment, not even glancing aside at his face as he finally rode on. No one spoke to me, the sergeant gripping my rein in one hand, his face as expressionless as though carved from stone. Once I asked a question of the trooper on the other side — a rather pleasant faced lad — but he only shook his head, and looked away. I was thus driven to my own solitary thoughts, and they were far from enjoyable.

I had been caught red-handed, within the enemy's lines, dressed in Federal uniform, and bearing papers purporting to belong to Lieutenant Raymond. There was no defense I could offer, no plea for mercy I could make. The court-martial before which I would be brought for trial would be merely a form — I was condemned already. I realized all this, yet the knowledge of my desperate condition did not weigh on my mind as heavily as did the memory of my rela-

tions with that careless, laughing girl riding in advance. Could she be acting a part? or did she actually feel indifferent to my fate? Surely she must know, must understand the conditions of my arrest. She was a soldier's daughter, and had seen enough of army life to realize the treatment given a captured spy. Yet the fate overhanging me apparently made not the slightest impression upon her. She had never glanced at me as she came forth from the house; she had passed me by as if totally unaware of my existence, and now I could hear the sound of her laughter, as she chattered unconcerned with her three companions. There was but one conclusion possible — she really cared nothing. She had, obeying blindly the first impulse, endeavored to protect me from arrest, yet even that effort might have been made in fear lest I announce our marriage. But now, assured that I would not speak, relieved of that dread, her only remaining desire was to forget me utterly, to blot me completely from her memory.

It was a bitter thought, and yet no other was possible; nothing in her conduct, in the echo of her laughing words, the interest she exhibited in her blue-coated cavaliers, led me to any other conclusion. Perhaps I should have realized that such light-heartedness on her part must be assumed, for, casting my own case entirely aside, it was not natural that

she should so soon forget the death of her father. It had come to her a shock, a blow. I had witnessed the intense suffering in her face at her earlier realization of the truth. She could not have forgotten so suddenly, so completely; her present effort to appear light-hearted, indifferent, must arise from some special purpose in her mind. In a vague way this occurred to me, but prejudice, doubt of her, had assumed possession of my brain, and I could not grasp the probability in any clearness. Her show of utter, heartless indifference hurt and blinded me. I actually believed the girl was glad of my capture; that she rejoiced at the knowledge that within a few hours she would be freed from all the consequences of our rash act. It was the reaction which had given her such high spirits, the exhilarating sense of escape, a relief so profound as to cause her to even forget her father's death. This was the conception which took possession of me, obliterating every other possibility.

At first the thought served to numb my faculties, and I rode forward with lowered head, all interest in life dead within me. Then pride came to the rescue, and I straightened up in the saddle. She was my wife — that slender, laughing girl! Of course I would never claim her; no word would ever pass my lips to bring to her pain and humiliation. No one

would ever know — excepting us two. But if I did speak she could not deny, and she must realize why I had kept silent, why I had even gone down to death with closed lips. She could not be a woman and fail to appreciate such a sacrifice. It would live in her memory; she would think of me as not altogether unworthy; she would know some time this was not a trick, but an accident, in which my part was as innocent as her own. Resentment would die out in her heart, and a kindlier feeling creep in. And then — there was yet a chance! While there was life there was hope, and I was soldier enough, and sufficiently reckless, to accept of any opportunity. There might occur a relaxation in the vigilance of the guard, some delay at Lewisburg, possibly a forwarding of me to headquarters at Charleston — some sudden, unexpected opening through which I could squeeze. I was ready enough to try, however desperate the occasion; and, if such a chance did serve, the end might not come merely with escape. I could see her again; talk with her face to face. It became a fascinating dream, an inspiration — at last a grim determination.

And so through the mud we rode steadily on, following the pike that curved along the base of the mountains, and finally into the streets of Lewisburg.

CHAPTER XVII

I CHOOSE DEATH



IKNEW the town well, and few changes had occurred since last I walked those streets hand in hand with my father. It had not grown any larger, and thus far the war had wrought little damage, although many of the shops were closed, and occasionally I observed marks of fire. The majority of the men on the street were in uniform, very few civilians and no women being visible, although I caught glimpses of curious faces peering at us through closed windows. Lewisburg had been strongly Southern in sentiment, and doubtless the majority of her male population were bearing arms in the Confederate ranks, or had taken to the mountains in guerrilla warfare. The most of life in the sleepy old town centered about the Frost Hotel, a three-story wooden structure, where the officers of the garrison lodged, and the court house, a dignified edifice of red brick, a block beyond, where in other days my father presided on the bench, now completely surrounded by a military camp. There were more Federal soldiers here than I had expected to see, but a remark exchanged between two of my

guard informed me that most of these had arrived during the night — a regiment of Ohio troops, and a battery of light artillery, destined to assist in a contemplated attack on Covington.

The head of our little column halted in front of the hotel, but Whitlock shouted a command to the sergeant, and we rode on past, the guard closing up tightly. I kept my face straight ahead, determined to make no sign, but, nevertheless, I had a glimpse of Noreen, standing at her horse's head, and, for an instant, I felt certain her eyes were resting on me. Momentary as this was — no doubt merely a glance of curiosity — yet it served to send the hot blood throbbing through my veins. That was the first faint sign vouchsafed me that she even recalled my existence, or gave me so much as a thought. She stood too far away for me to read the expression in her eyes, and yet, the very fact that her glance followed me brought quick response. Then Raymond spoke to her, touching her sleeve familiarly with his hand to attract attention, and she smiled up into his face, as if in answer to some witty remark. This was the last glimpse I had as we clattered on down the street.

At the court house steps the sergeant turned me over to the officer of the day, and I was marched into the basement. The old jail had evidently been burned, for I could see the roof had fallen in, and

the stone walls were blackened with smoke, but the lower story of the court house was bastile enough, the windows barred, the walls strong and thick. The place in which they thrust me had at one time protected the county records, was perhaps nine feet square, with one narrow window high up in the wall, and an iron door. The floor and walls were of stone, and the ceiling beyond reach. A soldier threw in a box, to be utilized as a seat, together with a couple of blankets.

“There, Johnny,” he said carelessly, “I guess you’ll stay here till you’re wanted. There’ll be some grub along after awhile.”

The iron door clanged behind him, and I heard the sharp click of a heavy lock, then regular steps passing back and forth across the stone floor, proof that a sentinel had been posted. There seemed little need of one as I sat down on the box, and stared disconsolately about. The window afforded ample light, but no hope of escape. I could barely reach it with my hands by standing on the box, and the opening, even if the iron grating could be removed, was far too small to permit the passage of my body. I merely glanced at the patch of blue sky thus revealed, and then permitted my eyes to wander along the solid walls, until they encountered the only bit of the original furnishings of this underground vault —

the shelves on which had once reposed the records of Green Briar County. They were of iron, as a safeguard against fire, with a sheet of iron at their back, concealing the wall behind. My heart gave a sudden leap; perhaps, after all, Fate had not been wholly unkind; at least I had another card left to play, and need not remain hopelessly staring about at those bare, solid walls. As a boy I had played about this building, invading every nook and corner. I could even recall when those shelves were first installed, and I had sat almost where I was sitting then, and watched the workmen bolt them into their present position. That seemed a long while ago — why, I could not have been more than eight or nine years of age. It was before my father bought the place out on the ridge, and we were living only a block down the street. This old courthouse was my favorite playground then, and I had explored every inch of it from cupola to wood cellar. I watched those workmen all one day, and the memory came back to me that those shelves rested against the big chimney, and there was an opening leading into it, across which they had nailed a tin protector before they fastened the iron to the wall.

If I could once get in behind that iron plate the way out would not be such a hard or difficult one to travel. The chimney was large; I recalled standing

upright in the fireplace on the floor above, and looking up to where I could perceive the light of the sky. It was constructed of irregular bits of stone, which would afford lodgment for the feet, and grip for the hands, in climbing — no easy job, of course, but not impossible for one reckless enough to make the attempt. But how could I hope to pry loose that protecting sheet of iron? Where could I discover a tool to give me the necessary leverage to dislodge those bolts? Could one of those supports be unscrewed or twisted off? If so it might prove strong enough for the purpose. I stepped hastily across, and tested two of them with my hands, but found both these firm and immovable. I dare not exercise much force in fear the noise might be overheard, and besides it was time the jailer brought me in some food. So I went back to my seat on the box, and waited, my eyes on the iron, and my mind eagerly working on some plan which seemed feasible. I had a half dozen keys in my pocket, and a broken cartridge shell in my belt — nothing else available. The searchers had stripped me clean. A careful survey of the floor revealed only a twisted nail, but there was something caught in the iron bars of the window; from where I sat it looked like the half of a broken horseshoe. I got up to see, but quickly sat down again — there was someone at the door.

It opened, and a soldier stood aside while two men entered. One was Fox, the other a heavy-set, gray mustached officer, in the uniform of a colonel of infantry. The captain greeted me gravely, and extended his hand.

“I would far rather meet you as I did before,” he said, “but war gives us no choice.”

“I took my chances, and have no complaint,” I answered heartily, for I liked the man. “I presume there is no doubt as to my fate?”

“I fear not, but the matter is not in my hands, for which I am grateful. This is Colonel Pickney, in command.”

I bowed, and our eyes met. The face confronting me was strong and resolute, its expression that of regret.

“A very young man, Captain Fox,” he said to his companion, “which fact adds to the unpleasantness of such duty. Your name is Wyatt?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You claim connection with the Confederate service — an officer?”

“A sergeant of artillery, sir.”

He cleared his throat impressively.

“You have the appearance of an intelligent man, Sergeant Wyatt, and must realize the seriousness of your position. I am sure I need not dwell upon the

fate which befalls a spy when captured by the enemy. In your case there seems to be no defense possible — you wear Federal uniform; were within our lines, and papers have been found on you of a most incriminating character. It is my understanding you make no denial.”

“None whatever, sir; it would be useless.”

“You have no reason to expect mercy?”

“No, sir.”

“Yet there is always a way in which mercy can be extended,” he went on earnestly. “Doubtless you possess information which would be of the utmost value to us. I shall gladly use my influence on your behalf if the circumstances warrant.”

“You mean, of course, if I will answer such question as you may ask me?”

“That is my meaning. You are from Jackson’s headquarters?”

“I am here under his orders.”

“The probability is, then, that you possess knowledge of the utmost value to us — worth, let me say, the sparing of life.”

I glanced aside at Fox, and caught the look of appeal in his face; then back into the expectant eyes of the colonel.

“You have authority to make me this proposition?” I asked quietly.

“I am in command of this camp, and my recommendation will have weight. I pledge you my influence with General Ramsay.”

“What is it you wish to know?”

“The number and disposition of Jackson’s troops; where they are at present stationed, and in what force; and any inkling you may have as to his immediate plans of campaign.”

“And in return for this information you guarantee me release from arrest?”

“That would be impossible, Sergeant,” and he laid his hand on my shoulder. “We shall have to hold you as prisoner of war, but there will be no charge made involving the death penalty.”

I stood motionless a moment, endeavoring to straighten the matter out in my own mind. When I spoke it was as briefly as possible.

“I can only thank you, Colonel Pickney,” I said quietly, “and respectfully decline. I am a soldier, and loyal to my flag; I accepted the chance of such a situation as this when General Jackson requested my services. Even at the cost of life I will not answer your questions, sir.”

“You will die the death of a spy; you will be hanged.”

“That is as God wills, sir; the threat has no effect upon me.”

Fox gripped my arm, and as I glanced at him, I was surprised to see a mist of tears in his eyes.

"Wyatt," he exclaimed, making no pretense at calmness, "do not be hasty in your decision. I would not counsel you to any act of dishonor, but surely some compromise is possible. I not only ask you to consider the situation from your own standpoint, but also from ours. I accompanied Colonel Pickney in the hope I might have some influence." He hesitated an instant, as though doubtful of his words. "Perhaps I should say, my boy, that another urged me to come."

"Another?"

"Yes — a lady."

My head swam, my heart beating like a trip-hammer.

"Do — do you mean, Captain Fox, that she actually asked you to urge me to save myself by such an act?"

"No, Wyatt; not that. She requested me to accompany Colonel Pickney, and do all I could on your behalf."

I drew a long breath of relief, my mind clearing, my resolve strengthened. She did care then! God knew I was glad; and she had not urged me to an act of dishonor. And I knew, I understood — she wished me to realize that she was not indifferent to

my fate, that her interest was not dead; and she had sent the message to me by the only man she could trust to rightly deliver it. But she would want me to decide right, for it was not in the character of Noreen Harwood to compromise with duty — better to die a death of disgrace than to live, and read the scorn in her eyes. My heart lightened, and my lips smiled.

“I thank you for your message, Captain Fox,” I said sincerely, clasping his hand. “Tell her how glad it made me. But it cannot change my decision; I will answer no questions.”

“This is your final reply, Sergeant?” the Colonel’s voice had hardened; his eyes had lost their friendliness.

“It is, sir.”

“Very well, then; there is nothing more for us to accomplish here, Fox. I think, young man, you will come to your senses too late. Good day, sir.”

The door opened to the rap of his knuckles, and the two men passed out, neither one glancing back at me. The sentry asked a question, and I heard Pickney answer:

“Yes, set the food within, but let no one communicate with the prisoner except on my written order. I will have another sentry posted above.”

A soldier entered bearing a camp ration, and a pannikin of water, and placed these on the box. He

said nothing, and the colonel stood beside the door watching, until I was left alone. Then the iron shutter closed, and I heard the bar which secured it forced down into place. As I stared about me at the bare, solid walls, I knew that I was already condemned; that the court-martial which would follow would be only a mere form. Yet for the moment this knowledge scarcely penetrated my consciousness — one thing I remembered, her message. She cared! she would serve me if she could! Her thought of me was kindly! I put the food on the floor untouched, and sat down on the box. I wanted to live; I was young, ambitious, and — I loved that girl. I realized this truth clearly, and it became the one ceaseless incentive to effort. Her face arose before me, and I felt that her message was meant for my encouragement. She wanted me to live; wished me to know that she was not indifferent; trusted me to accomplish all that a man could. And I must act now, if at all. The time allowed me was short — how short I could not even guess. I ate the food, not from any sense of hunger, but because I needed it to keep up my strength, my mind ever busy with the problem. Would they give me a few hours respite — opportunity to reflect? If so, there was hope; I could plan and work, with some faith that the coming night would bring me a chance for escape. I was alone,

unwatched; there was no place where an eye could peer in on my movements. I dragged the box over to the window, stood on it, and managed to dislodge the bit of iron entangled in the grating. It proved to be part of a discarded horseshoe, flung there carelessly by some farrier, and contained three thin-headed nails. With difficulty I loosened one of these, and fitted the sharp edge into a screwhead of a shelf bracket. The nail afforded little purchase, and I tried three of the screws before finding one loose enough to turn. By this time my fingers were numb and bleeding, yet the final success set my heart throbbing with exultation.

The removal of the screw, which by chance was the lower one, enabled me to insert the remnant of horseshoe beneath the bracket iron. Slowly, fearful of creating alarm, this improvised lever wrenched the bracket free, until I was enabled to get firm grip on it with my hands. With foot braced, and every muscle strained, I worked that bit of iron back and forth, tearing it free, until I knew that another wrench would separate it entirely from its fastenings. Then I forced it back into place again, pressed down the loosened screws, carefully gathered together the slight debris littering the floor, and cast it into a dark corner. The bracket seemed as solid as ever. Now I must wait for night.

CHAPTER XVIII

UNDER DEATH SENTENCE



IT WAS dreary waiting, for every unusual sound reaching me brought with it a throb of fear. That my fate was already practically settled I knew, but how long the delay might be remained a problem. All I could hope for was that final action might be postponed until the morrow, thus giving me the protection of the night in which to put my plans into execution. Again and again I reviewed all the circumstances, so far as I understood them, seeking to convince myself that this time would be permitted me. Yet it was all guesswork, and I doubted my own conclusions. Colonel Pickney was evidently a stern and resolute officer, yet with a kindly expression in his face, yielding me some hope of delay. He would do his duty undoubtedly, but was not a man to take pleasure in the execution of such a sentence involving a human life. He would naturally postpone the inevitable as long as possible, in the hope that I might change my mind, or that some conditions might arise to relieve him of the unpleasant responsibility. He might even decide the matter of sufficient import-

ance to send me to headquarters at Charleston, or hold me under guard to await the arrival of some higher officer. Fox, I felt convinced, would use whatever influence he possessed to delay action, and there was a faint hope in my mind also that Noreen might even make a plea to higher authorities in my behalf. I dare not believe she would, but the vague dream of such a thing recurred again and again to my mind.

Of course I had no conception that her thought centered on me, or that there was any depth of personal feeling in the slight interest she had already displayed by her request to Captain Fox. This was no more than the natural expression of a tender-hearted woman. We had been playmates and friends; this fact alone was sufficient to justify an effort on her part to prevent my dying an ignominious death. Besides, my capture had occurred through an attempt to serve her. This was her plea for me, and no other; this was the excuse with which she justified her interest in the case. The fact that she was legally my wife was to be kept secret — was to be forgotten forever, if possible. At first she had been frightened at the situation, fearful lest I urge our relationship as an excuse for being with her; but now she was reassured by my silence. Believing the secret safe in my keeping she was willing to venture a word in my behalf, actuated by dictates of humanity.

This was the conclusion to which I came, and, indeed no other solution appeared probable. But even this did not evidence a dislike of me, a desire to punish, or a deep feeling of animosity. This knowledge alone brought me a real comfort, and a strengthening of courage. I listened at the door, my ear pressed against the iron, distinguishing the tramp of the guard in the corridor without, and occasionally the low rumble of words, as though there were two sentries on duty. To learn all I could I dragged the box to a position below the window, and standing on it, managed to gain a narrow glimpse without, the vista revealing a flap of dirty tent cloth and part of an army wagon backed up against the building, leaving barely enough space for the guard to pace back and forth the length of his beat. I could see his blue-clad legs, with the white stripe, cross and recross in front of me. I tested the strength of the iron grating with my hands, but the bars were firmly imbedded and immovable.

The afternoon brought me two visitors. The first was an infantry captain, quick spoken and immaculate of dress, who merely looked me over much as an entomologist might examine a strange bug, commanding me to stand up, and turn around, so as to yield view of my profile. From certain questions asked I supposed him endeavoring to identify me

with some suspicious character with whom he had previously come in contact. What conclusion the man reached, or what report he made to Pickney, I am unable to say, for he stalked out again as silently as he had entered, and the guard banged the door shut. The sun must have been well down in the west when Fox returned. I had been expecting him, trusting to his friendly interest, and with a fleeting hope that Noreen might commission him to bring me some further message. Yet the moment I looked into his face, shadowed by the fading light, I realized that he brought no encouraging news. My heart sank, but I kept a smile on my lips.

“I expected to be out of here before now,” I said meaningly, “yet I judge from your expression there is no reprieve.”

“And no hope of one, Wyatt,” he answered regretfully. “The evidence against you is too strong. The delay in convening a court has been caused by the scarcity of officers in camp. Our forage trains are just beginning to return, but it is now so late that Colonel Pickney has decided to hold you prisoner until morning. I waited until the order was issued before coming here. The court-martial is set for eight o’clock.”

“I am thankful for even that delay. There is, I presume, no doubt as to the result?”

“None, so far as I can learn. You are a soldier, Wyatt, and may as well face the truth. I have urged mercy on Colonel Pickney, until he finally ordered me to drop the subject. He is a strict disciplinarian, a bit of a martinet, indeed, and inclined to take the advice of a regular army officer in such matters, rather than rely on volunteers. Has Raymond any special reason to dislike you?”

“Only that I impersonated him in this masquerade.”

“Bah! that was mere chance, the selection of his name from the army list. The fellow is naturally vindictive enough, but surely could not harbor personal dislike over so small a matter.” He paused hesitatingly, as though doubtful of the propriety of pressing an inquiry. “I trust you will pardon me, Wyatt, but I have wondered if there was not some trouble existing between you relative to the friendship of Miss Harwood.”

“That would appear impossible,” I replied, somewhat surprised, “for my being with her was entirely accidental.”

“Yes, so she insists; but I know Raymond is deeply interested in the girl. Someone told me he actually proposed to her at West Point, and sought this detail in hope of meeting her again. The occurrence which aroused my suspicion that he felt a per-

sonal grudge against you was this — I know he promised her to use his influence to have you sent to Charleston for trial, but instead he urged Colonel Pickney to exercise his own authority. I chanced to be in the next room, and overheard.”

“ You told her? ”

“ No; I have not seen the young lady since. It is rather a delicate matter to become involved in. I felt that I had better consult with you first. He has not been here? ”

“ No.”

“ He informed Pickney that he intended to come. He apparently desired to know just how you chanced to assume his name, and procured the necessary uniform, but I thought he might have some other object.”

My mind worked rapidly. That Raymond was treacherous was probably true, and that, whether he actually knew it or not, he had reason to suspicion my relationship with the lady was equally a fact. Yet really he knew nothing, nor was it my privilege to enlighten him. I felt no pangs of jealousy, for, from what little I had observed, Noreen had treated him with marked coldness. There could be no great degree of intimacy between them, or she would have chosen him in this emergency rather than Captain Fox. But she had revealed to neither officer the fact

of our marriage; it was not so much as suspected and it would be treachery on my part to even whisper it in confidence. Her reticence and silence were sufficient to close my lips, for it would not serve her in any way for me to reveal the story to Fox. While I liked the man, and had abundant confidence in his discretion, yet, if I was destined to die, the secret had better perish with me, while if I did escape, she would respect me the more if I thus established my purpose of protecting her from the gossip of the camp.

“How is it, Wyatt?” he asked, as I failed to speak. “Should Miss Harwood be informed of the lieutenant’s action?”

“By no means, Captain. If the man exhibits bitterness toward me, it can have no bearing upon her. She is naturally interested in saving the life of an old playmate, and I imagine understands pretty well Raymond’s character, without your information. I doubt if she really trusted the fellow even when she made him a messenger.”

“So do I, for later she went herself.”

“To Colonel Pickney?”

“Yes, an hour ago, after Raymond returned with his report. I was at the hotel, and saw her slip out the side door, with a shawl thrown over her head. The lady evidently did not wish to be seen, and had

waited until the lieutenant had gone to his room. Colonel Pickney has headquarters in the big stone house opposite the court yard — ”

“ The old Carter place.”

“ Yes; I had forgotten you knew the town. It can be seen from the hotel porch, and I had the curiosity to watch. She was inside nearly half an hour, and returned by way of the side street. Then she sent for me.”

“ She told you the result of her interview? ”

“ It was not even mentioned, but I knew she had met with no success. She seemed distressed, but was anxious that you should know at once the seriousness of your position, and the only hope of escape offered you.”

My heart was beating fiercely at this direct evidence of her interest in my affairs. She had even humbled herself to beg for me a chance; perhaps, to Colonel Pickney she had even confessed the truth in hope of changing his decision. But the effort had proven useless; he had named terms, which she evidently considered unworthy.

“ What hope? ” I asked coldly. “ You mean the terms offered me before? ”

He bowed gravely, but without speaking.

“ And did Miss Harwood request you to urge my acceptance? ”

“By no means. Her purpose was to acquaint you with the conditions, to relieve your suspense, and permit you to realize her friendliness. I was to tell you this frankly, but not to urge any decision upon you.”

“And I thank you, Captain Fox, and beg you to express to her my appreciation of her kind loyalty. Her interest has brought me happiness even here. But I cannot accept the terms offered by Colonel Pickney. I will give him no information relative to General Jackson’s command. My former decision was final. My life is of small account in this struggle, and its preservation would be no excuse for treachery.”

Fox grasped my hand firmly in both his own.

“I am glad of your decision, Wyatt,” he said earnestly. “I had no doubt of what it would be; nor do I think she had. Is there anything I can do? Any comfort I can add?”

“Only one; I would ask of Miss Harwood a single favor. It is that she write my mother the conditions of my death — a woman can do that best.”

He took an envelope from his pocket, and a pencil.

“How should such a letter be addressed?”

“Mrs. Margaret Wyatt, Goldsboro, North Carolina.”

“I can promise you it shall be done. I sincerely wish, Wyatt, we had met under pleasanter circum-

stances. This is a sad ending to what might have been a lasting friendship; I confess I have learned to like you, my boy."

"And I you, Captain Fox," I responded earnestly, feeling deeply his friendliness. "My experiences of war have not made me bitter, and I know there are real men on both sides. I am simply doing my duty, as you are doing yours, and there is no enmity between us. And," in spite of every effort at control my voice faltered, "you will tell Miss Harwood how much her message of kindness meant to me."

"I certainly will, my lad — is that all? It may not be possible for me to come again."

"There is nothing else; Jackson will learn the truth through other sources — good-by, and may God guard you."

"Good-by."

Our hands clung, our eyes met, and then he turned away, without venturing to glance back; the door closed behind him, and I stood staring at it through blurred vision. I was still standing there motionless when the iron barrier opened again a few inches, and the hand of a soldier pushed a tin containing food along the floor.

"Here's your supper, Johnny," growled a voice indistinctly, "an' I guess you won't be bothered any more tonight."

It was already quite dusk in the cell, but outside the grated window a campfire burned, and the red glare found way through the bars, and rendered the interior visible. I sat on the box, and choked down what food I could, endeavoring to drive away the feeling of depression in which Fox had left me. I needed now strength and courage to front the one chance left.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ONE PATH OF ESCAPE



HERE was absolutely nothing for me to do but wait, but it was hard to judge time. My watch had been taken from me, and I was fearful lest I choose a wrong hour for my exploit. The noise of the camp without was some guide, however, but, as the evening lengthened, a band began playing overhead, and I could hear the sound of feet on the floor above. Evidently a dance was in progress in the big court room, and for the moment my heart seemed to stop beating in a sudden fear that my plan of escape for that night was blocked. It was the big fireplace opening into this room through which I had hoped to emerge, but I could never accomplish such hope amidst of those dancers. And they might keep up their dancing to so late an hour as to give me no opportunity before dawn to find a place in which to elude search. Yet the noise was in my favor, if I could only be assured the chimney was wide enough above to permit of my finally reaching the roof. Once there I would discover a way down. The band was a good one, and the musicians played with energy; I could even

distinguish the tapping of the leader's foot on the floor almost directly above my head. The noise made by the dancers was muffled and confused, and, while I knew there were voices talking, and could occasionally catch the sound of a laugh, the whole was merely a din, entirely meaningless. The grim incongruity of that merry party above, dancing and laughing in the bright light, and of myself in that black cell below, waiting the certainty of death the next morning, served to steel my resolve — the affair was like an insult, and I felt my blood grow hot in my veins as the strains of a waltz and schottish mingled with the uproar of nimble feet. I would take the chance, and it might as well be now.

I could hear nothing of the guard in the corridor, although I listened intently, my ear against the iron door, during a lull in that babel overhead. It was hardly likely another inspection would be made, at least not until the sentries were again relieved, probably at midnight. To my judgment this would allow me nearly three hours in which to make my effort — and surely half that time should prove sufficient. The band burst into harmony again — a polka, I remember — and I tore free the loosened support. It made an ugly bit of iron, well adapted for the purpose I had in mind. Not only could it be utilized as a lever, but it was no mean weapon for use in emergency.

I found the iron sheathing difficult to penetrate, and it must have required fifteen or twenty minutes to break the edge loose so as to insert the point of my wedge. The effort tore my hands terribly, but desperation gave me a strength which finally pressed back the thin sheet of iron. The bar, once inserted, furnished the necessary leverage, forcing the iron to yield about the rivet heads. The operation required time, and was by no means noiseless, but the blaring of the band drowned the rasping sound, and enabled me to exercise all my strength. This opening gave me both hand and foot-hold, together with a new faith in my ultimate success. I waited between the dances, recruiting strained muscles, and, listening anxiously for any alarming sound in the corridor; only to spring again feverishly to the work the moment the band resumed playing.

Again and again I thought my effort would fail, yet the barrier yielded inch by inch, bursting from the grip of the rivets as I succeeded in achieving leverage, until I forced fully half the iron curtain backward, jamming it against the wall, and thus revealed the black opening into the chimney. It was there just as I had remembered, and the proof brought me fresh hope, and renewed determination. There was danger ahead, yet the most difficult part of my desperate undertaking had been accomplished.

I knelt down and stared breathlessly into the yawning cavity, and thrust my head into the opening seeking for some gleam of light above. There was none, nor was there any smell of smoke. This discovery relieved one anxiety, while it brought a new problem. Had the oldtime fireplaces been permanently closed, so as to compel me to climb to the very roof in order to obtain an exit? The opening which I had uncovered was sufficiently large to permit the squeezing through of my body, and, once within the chimney, I found ample space in which to explore.

I could see nothing, and was compelled to rely entirely upon the sense of touch. This, however, quickly convinced me that the opposite wall was solid, containing not even a flue hole. Then assuredly no furnace had ever been installed in the building, and either open fireplaces, or stoves, were used for heating purposes in those rooms above. Probably the former had been discarded and the latter substituted since the days of my boyhood, which would account for the darkness above. The oldtime openings had been closed, sealed up, and so the chances were that only the roof afforded opportunity for my escape. I felt grave doubt as to my ability to attain that elevation; it was not a pleasant prospect, but I had already gone too far to hesitate. This was my

only chance, and I must either give it a trial, or resign myself to the certain fate of the morrow.

Iron bars had been left on one side the chimney, forming an irregular ladder, whether for strengthening or some other purpose, I cannot say. My groping hands located these, and by their aid I began to climb slowly upward through the pitch darkness. The chimney walls were at the beginning so wide apart as to afford me no grip, but by the time the iron bands disappeared, which was just below the floor of the first story, the chimney had narrowed sufficiently to enable me to brace myself between its jagged sides. In this manner I not only managed to keep from falling, but even succeeded in advancing slowly, although the sharp edges of the stone lacerated hands and knees painfully. At the level of the first story I came upon a projection of rock, possibly six or eight inches wide, on which I found secure foothold, and was thus able to regain breath and strength for a renewal of the struggle. I was crouched opposite the oldtime fireplace, and the band, playing noisily, was within a very few feet of where I hid. However, not a gleam of light was visible, and it was some time before I located the opening which had been left for a stovepipe. Even then I could feel no pipe, but, as I extended my arm, a finger burst through the paper which had been pasted across the entrance, and

a glow of radiance illumined the black walls about me.

I waited motionless, holding my breath in fear that some eye might have witnessed the tearing of the paper; but there was no cessation of noise, no evidence of discovery. The band ceased to play, and the murmur of voices in conversation reached me where I clung precariously to the ragged wall. It was a mere monotone, the mingled words indistinguishable, confused by feet moving across the floor. Then some voice announced the next dance, and the band began again.

Assailed by a temptation to view the scene, I found foothold a little higher up, and, clinging to the edge of the hole, brought my eyes to a level with the rent in the paper. The vista was not a wide one, and I dare not enlarge the space, yet I saw sufficient to yield me full knowledge of the party, and its occasion. The floor was crowded, the men almost without exception in Federal uniform. A few of these were dancing together, as though there was a scarcity of women partners, but the fairer sex were not altogether lacking, and I had little difficulty in distinguishing the officers' wives from the town belles by the cut and material of their gowns. The latter, however, predominated, proving either that the feminine inhabitants of Lewisburg were loyal in their senti-

ments, or that the Yankee invaders had made a complete capture of the town. Whichever theory was the true one, both sexes were enjoying themselves to the top of their bent, forgetful of everything except the pleasure of the moment.

The couples whirled past, circling the room. I could distinguish uniforms of every grade below that of colonel, and representatives of the three arms of the service. Occasionally a black coat appeared conspicuously amid the throng on the floor, but there were more of these visible along the side walls. It was evidently military night, and the ladies looked kindly on brass buttons and gold lace. The big room resounded to the tap of feet, and the ceaseless murmur of voices; laughter rang out, and over all the merry strain of music.

I watched the faces eagerly, but they were all strange. No doubt some of those young women I had known as girls, but they had grown out of my recollection. None among the officers present, so far as I could tell, had I ever come in contact with — ah! yes! there was Whitlock sitting disconsolately alone below the judge's bench. I clung to my perch determining to assure myself, but my eyes encountered no other familiar countenance. Of course Noreen would not attend, but there must be some special cause to account for Raymond's absence. He was the sort

to whom such an occasion as this would naturally appeal.

Satisfied by my scrutiny, I explored the opposite wall in vain for any similar opening. As I remembered there were offices there, where in days of peace the county officers held sway, and the floor above was an unfurnished attic, extending the full length of the building, having a low, unceiled roof. In the old days it had been used for storage purposes, and there was a narrow stairway leading down into the sheriff's office. Ay! and there was a contrivance there once in which they used to burn waste papers. I remembered a certain house-cleaning in which I assisted, and was assigned to the job of stirring the papers frequently with an iron poker. I thought it fun, and the chimney funnel was a big one. Possibly it was there still, but could I succeed in getting up that far? The light shining through the broken paper permitted a faint glimpse of my immediate surroundings, yet revealed little to encourage such an attempt. The chimney was barely large enough to admit the upward passage of my body, and was a black mystery. However, the irregularity of the stones promised finger and foot-hold, and if the opening retained the same formation to the top, I might be able to squeeze through without serious accident. At any rate the effort must be made — to retreat, or even to

remain where I was, involved consequences far more dangerous than those threatened by this tunnel. It offered a chance, a hope — and I could ask no more.

These were but flashes of thought, for I was climbing before the music ceased, clinging desperately to every slight projection, and bracing myself against the walls. Progress was slow, and occasionally painful; the contracted space gave me a feeling of suffocation, and I dislodged enough soot so I was compelled to struggle constantly to restrain from coughing. My only relief was to bind a handkerchief across mouth and nostrils.

While the music remained silent, I rested, fearful lest my struggles would be overheard, taking such meager comfort as I could. The first blare of the horns started me off once more, careless in the midst of so much noise as to whether I rattled the loosened plaster, or even dislodged an ill-secured stone. But at the best the passage was made by inches, and I took more than one desperate chance of slipping; twice I clung breathless as the music ceased, but the second time I felt convinced I had attained to the level of the upper floor. This was but a decision of judgment, as my only guidance came from the noise below, and the distance which it seemed to me I had clambered up. There was no change in my surroundings as revealed by my groping hands — the same

solid four walls of rubble stone and plaster, but these thus far ran straight up, wide enough apart to permit the passage of my body.

With the next burst of melody from below, now somewhat mellowed by distance and the intervening walls, I made another attempt to ascend, but had scarcely attained more than a foot or two when my right hand plunged into a wide opening. Clinging as best I could to a precarious footing, I ran my arm deeper in until I came in contact with a tin covering, which yielded easily to the pressure of my fingers, and finally fell rather noisily to the floor. I paused, startled at the sound, but no gleam of light came through the opening, and I instantly realized that the attic was unoccupied. The rattle of the tin would, in all probability, create no alarm because of the din below.

I knew now exactly where I was, the only immediate problem being my ability to squeeze through that narrow space. The oldtime burner had evidently been removed, and a tin cap fitted over the chimney hole. I wiggled my way in head first, shoulders drawn together, hands gripping the outer edge, and feet pressed strong against the inside of the chimney. At first it seemed as if I hardly moved, and I was wedged so closely that every attempt to breathe gave me pain; yet to crush my way forward was easier

than an attempt to retreat, and I pushed with all my power, feeling my clothes tear, yet conscious of some slight advance. The encouragement of this success led to a redoubling of effort, my shoulders drawn close, and every muscle strained to its utmost. My knees were doubled up in the chimney, and my feet found solid purchase against the stones. I felt as though the very skin was being peeled off me, but I shot forward, my head and shoulders emerging into the open. Heavens! what a relief! I drew a long breath, dangling over the floor, unable to reach any support; then kicked and struggled until I fell out headlong, and lay too exhausted even to move.

It was so still I could plainly hear the swift beating of my heart, and so dark that not an object was discernible. The music below had ceased, and, as I was now on the opposite side of the building, the sound of conversation and movement did not reach me. For a long moment I lay there endeavoring to recall the surroundings, but I dare not waste much time in such idleness. The night was slipping away, and every instant gained was to my advantage. There was no safety until I was out of this building. I ached from head to foot, my clothes must be in rags, and, no doubt, I was as black as a negro from chimney soot. Yet my heart beat high with hope, and the spirit of adventure gripped me.

The stairs were somewhere to the right, unprotected by even a handrail. I crept toward them across the rough board floor, fearing a fall, and finally located the opening. Nothing indicated that the room below was occupied, and I slipped down as silently as possible, although the steps creaked under my weight. Once in the sheriff's room, some recollection of its form and furnishing recurred to mind; my memory, served by the dim reflection of a camp-fire without, which rendered objects faintly visible. I could distinguish the desk, and a few rounded-back wooden chairs pushed against the wall. There was a door to the left, standing ajar, leading into a wash-room, and I ventured within, feeling about to assure myself if there had been any water left. I found a bucket nearly full, and two bars of soap, and unable to resist the luxury, I stripped off my ragged uniform coat, and began vigorous scrubbing. How thorough a job I made of it I cannot tell, but the soap lathered freely, and I certainly did my best, using up an entire roller towel in the final effort to attain cleanliness.

There was a coat and hat hanging on the hooks, neither article of the highest respectability I judged from feeling them, but more to my purpose than the rags I had cast aside, and I donned the two gladly, finding them no bad fit. The hat was looped up with a star. Feeling quite myself again in these new

habiliments; and conscious of a clean face, I stole across the sheriff's deserted office, seeking the door into the corridor. I found it, but it was locked. Failing to force this I tried the windows, only to discover them securely barred. All these offices were connected together, that of the county clerk adjoining the sheriff's, and possibly I might find a door unlocked somewhere; at least none of the other windows would be ironed.

I listened at the door leading into the clerk's room, but heard no sound. There was no lock on the door, and it opened silently to the pressure of my hand. A flood of light swept into my eyes, and I stood blinking blindly, too surprised and startled to draw instantly back. There were two men in the room, one bending over a desk, the other sitting leaning back against the wall directly facing me. The latter was Lieutenant Raymond.

CHAPTER XX

I MAKE TWO PRISONERS



SAW him stare, open mouthed, as though at a ghost. There was a startled look in his face, but no recognition. The same swift glimpse had revealed to me a discarded belt on the end of the desk, in which glittered the pearl handle of a revolver. With one step forward I had the weapon in my possession, and sprang between both men and the door.

“Not a single move, gentlemen!” I commanded crisply, yet not venturing to speak loud, for fear of a guard outside. “Lieutenant, place your gun on the desk!”

He had it half-drawn, but my weapon was aimed straight at his head.

“What the hell!” he sputtered.

“Never mind! Do as I say first, and then ask questions — take it by the barrel; now slide it across to me.”

My eyes glanced aside at the face of the other, who was looking up, scarcely comprehending even yet what had occurred, and recognized Colonel Pickney. So I had blindly strayed into headquarters!

Well, it was a ticklish position, but, for the moment at least, I had the upper hand. Now I must use my wit to retain it. The confused, startled look on the two faces amused me — Raymond gasped like a fish out of water, and the florid features of the colonel expressed a chagrin too deep for words. I thought he would explode, he sputtered so before he could give vocal utterance to his discovery.

“By God, it’s that damn spy!”

“What!” and the Lieutenant took a step forward, only to shrink back as my revolver came to a level. “The Johnny we were going to hang?”

“Were going to — yes,” and I smiled grimly, “but you are not quite so cocksure of it now. What have you here?”

I glanced sidelong at the paper on which the Colonel’s hand still rested. My eyes caught but a line or two, yet enough to convince me it was an order of court-martial.

“Intended for my case, sir?”

He nodded angrily, growling out an indistinct word.

“Tear it up; I have decided against being present. You heard me — tear it up!”

He was raging inwardly, but must have read the meaning of my eyes for his hands tore the sheet across, and flung the fragments to the floor.

“It is your turn now, Johnny,” he said sneeringly, “but it won’t last long. There is a sentinel outside.”

“I supposed so; and any noise either one of you make will be the last sound you’ll utter in this world. That is no idle threat, gentlemen; so don’t take the chance. My life is at stake in this game I’m playing, and I shall shoot to kill.”

“How the devil did you get here?”

“We will discuss that when we have more time. Lieutenant Raymond, I will trouble you to step around back of the desk — no, the other way; I advise you not to be tricky. Colonel Pickney, sit up in your chair, and put your hands behind you in through the openings in the chair back. Oh, yes you will! Don’t be a fool, man! What is this — a hair trigger?”

I never saw anyone more thoroughly angry; he would have killed me with the utmost pleasure, and, indeed, for an instant, I expected him to actually make the attempt. But my eyes glared into his, and the pearl-handled revolver was within six inches of his head, and the man was not insane. Slowly, reluctantly, as though actually forced into the action, his arms were thrust backward into a posture of helplessness. His lips sputtered, but he could not even swear.

“Now Raymond, take that belt and bind him,” I commanded sternly. “Go to it, and be quick. Remember I have a gun in each hand. Pass it clear around his body, and across the wrists. Now draw it tight — oh! tighter than that! I expect it to hurt him! Good Lord, man, this is war! I am the one you have cause to feel afraid of — he cannot court-martial you for obeying my orders with a gun at your head. That’s it — now catch the buckle.”

Pickney choked with rage to which he dare not give vent, and the hands of the lieutenant shook as though from chill. His face was so white I began to think the fellow had a streak of cowardice in him, but his very fear might give him recklessness. I shoved the muzzle of a revolver against his coat.

“Now this other around his legs; strap them tight to the chair. Very good, indeed; you are learning your trade.”

I tested the taut leather with one hand.

“That will hold you, Colonel, all but your mouth, and I hope you have enough sense left to guard that yourself. Raymond,” and my glance swept the walls of the room hastily, “I regret troubling you so much; it is like adding insult to injury — but would you reach me those overalls hanging on the hook behind you. Thank you; now turn that chair, so the back will be this way, and — sit down.”

He knew what I meant, and there was an ugly look in his eyes, but I gave him no time for action. The colonel was safe enough, and I felt free to give my entire attention to the younger man. Nor did I feel any inclination to deal with him gently. It was his jealousy and malice which were largely responsible for my position of peril, and he had exhibited petty meanness in his treatment of me when he possessed the power. Now, for the moment, at least, that power was mine, and the recollection left me no inclination to be gentle. I gripped him by the collar, twisting my knuckles into his throat, and thrust him down into the chair seat with a violence which caused the fellow to gasp for breath.

“You move when I speak!” I said threateningly. “This is no boy’s play. Now put your hands back — oh, farther than that; cross them over each other. Come, do you feel the steel! I do not like you any too well, Raymond; I know your treachery.”

“I did nothing against you,” he protested wriggling about to gain glimpse of my face. “I had no authority here — ”

“No, but you had influence, and used it against me. I got the story straight enough, and can guess the reason. You were going to call on me, but you failed to do so.”

“Did Captain Fox tell you that?”

“Never mind who told me. We are not discussing the affair now. Sit back straighter; there, I reckon that will hold. Oh! it hurts, does it? I meant it should. Let me see; there ought to be some cord in one of these drawers. Ah, I thought so; now I will make a good job of it.”

I stood off and looked at the two of them, surprised at the ease with which I had accomplished the result, but entirely at sea as to my next movement. All I had done since entering the room had been instinctive rather than thoughtful. I had accepted the only course open, but the work had been done without plan, without conception of what must follow. There was a guard on duty in the corridor without, and, no doubt, another at the door of the building. Apparently there was no other point of egress, and to remain where I was would result in certain discovery, and that soon. My success was but temporary, and my peril in no degree lessened by what had already been accomplished. No plan, no hopeful possibility, occurred to me; I could but stare vacantly at my two prisoners, and about at the walls of the room. Raymond was jammed back into one corner farthest from the door, his face white, every bit of nerve gone, and a red welt showing where my grip had contracted the flesh. The fellow actually looked pitiful he was so completely

cowed. But Pickney was of a different kidney. He sat glaring angrily at me across the table, with face red as the rising sun, straining at the tough leather, his lips muttering incoherent threats of vengeance.

"I'll get you yet, you damned rascal," I heard him growl, "and stretch your neck without any trial."

"And I'll gag that mouth of yours," I answered "and keep it still for awhile. Oh, yes, you'll open up, my man! I know a trick that will make you bite the tighter I pull the cord. How about you, Lieutenant? Would you like a dose of the same medicine?"

I stepped across to him, a strip of cloth in my hand, but just at that instant the latch of the door rattled as though a hand without gripped it. I had barely time in which to leap back against the wall, hidden from view, when the door opened inward. All I saw was the glimpse of a man's hand and sleeve. The fellow must have perceived nothing to alarm him, for he merely held the door ajar.

"A lady to see the colonel," he announced briefly. "Just step in, miss."

I saw her advance two steps, and then stop motionless, with half-suppressed cry of surprise. The sentry could not have heard the slight exclamation, for he closed the door, the latch clicking sharply. Her eyes opened wide, staring first at the Colonel,



"You!" she exclaimed. "You here— and free! What—what have you done to these men?"

then at Raymond, so startled at the discovery of their predicament as to be dazed. I took a step forward, and for the first time, she became aware of another person in the room. She drew hastily back, one hand flung out, as though in defense, for the instant failing to recognize me in citizen's clothes. Then the swift light of recognition leaped into her eyes, as she leaned forward to scan me more closely in the dim light of the single lamp. I could not tell, I could not be sure, yet I thought the expression on her face was one of relief, of rejoicing.

"You!" she exclaimed, as though not yet half convinced of the truth. "You here — and free! What — what have you done to these men?"

I laughed lightly, so relieved by her reception as to feel a new man.

"Merely turned the tables; this time luck was on my side."

"You have not hurt them?"

"Oh, no; there was no necessity. They were quite easily persuaded. I was fortunate enough to gain possession of all the weapons, and neither gentleman seemed eager to prove a hero. As you perceive, they are like lambs."

They hardly looked it, for if ever murder glared unconcealed in the eyes of men, it did then; but they were helpless to move, or express themselves — at

least the colonel was, although he struggled fiercely. The younger officer made no attempt, his thin lips drawn back in a cruel snarl. I was certain there was a swift gleam of amusement in the girl's eyes, but it passed quickly as her glance again met mine.

"But you! Tell me; I must understand in order to know what to do. How did you come here?"

"The explanation is simple enough, and these gentlemen will be interested also in hearing about it. No doubt they think I dropped from the sky. When my father was the judge of this court, I was free to play about the building, and in that way I learned all its secrets. They chose the old record room as my cell, and I was aware that the big central chimney composed the greater part of its inner wall. My only problem was to break through, and this I succeeded in doing. There was a dance in the courtroom, and the noise enabled me to work without discovery. I crept up through the chimney, and came out in the attic. There are stairs leading down into the sheriff's office, just beyond there. That was where I found these clothes, but the door into the corridor was locked, and so I came in here. I had no suspicion the room was occupied, until I came face to face with these men. But they were more surprised even than I. I got the guns first, and that ended it; but I cannot hold you up that way."

“There is no necessity.”

“No!” I could not keep the joyous note out of my voice. “You mean —”

“Merely, that I came here seeking your release, or rather to urge that you be given a trial at Charleston. It is scarcely likely under all conditions that I will prevent your escape, or attempt to do so. You saved me from a fate worse than death, and was captured while endeavoring to serve me. Surely you did not suppose I had forgotten? You received my message?”

“Yes, and was most thankful for it. I confess I had doubted before.”

“I read your thoughts in your face; that was one reason why I wished to reassure you. I could not be ungrateful.” She glanced across the room, and began again as though anxious to get upon another topic. “I — I requested Lieutenant Raymond to intercede in your behalf, and he pledged me his word to do so. Less than an hour ago I learned he was exerting his influence with Colonel Pickney against my wishes. I determined to come here in person, and learn the truth. Have you any explanation, Lieutenant Raymond.”

“The fellow is a self-confessed spy,” he asserted hoarsely. “There was nothing I could say to save him.”

“ Did you attempt to say anything? ”

“ Why, yes; I — ”

“ Lieutenant, I made no request that you would interpose to save this man from his just fate under military law. My father was a soldier, and I know a soldier's duty. All I asked was that he be sent to Charleston, to the headquarters of this department, where he could have an impartial trial. If you had so advised Colonel Pickney that would have been done. He would have gladly shifted the responsibility elsewhere. Now the full burden of decision falls on me. I must choose between two duties.”

“ Two duties? ”

“ Yes — two; my loyalty to the Union, or to my husband.”

Raymond certainly was no more startled than I at this avowal, perhaps less so, for although the words choked in his throat, he managed to give them utterance.

“ Your husband! Good God! do you mean to say you are married to this fellow? ”

“ I not only mean to say it,” she said calmly, “ but I have the proof with me. I tell you the fact merely to justify my action, for I intend to save him if I can. I wish Colonel Pickney to know why I do this — what conditions justify me in so rebellious a course. This man does not deserve death; he was

captured while defending me from insult, and he is my husband. I should be unworthy the name of woman if I did not aid his escape."

She turned to me, her eyes eager.

"Tom, you must do just as I say."

CHAPTER XXI

THE LADY CHOOSES



HE came across toward me, her back to the others, and spoke swiftly, yet in a low voice which did not carry to their ears.

“There is only one way possible for you to pass out of this building and through the camp safely. There are guards everywhere, and the orders are very strict; but I think we can go together. I know the countersign — Captain Fox is officer of the day, and trusted me with it. If — if you only had a uniform! Where is the one you wore?”

“My trip through the chimney left that in rags,” I answered, impressed by her earnestness, and getting my wits together.

She glanced about the walls of the room, a frown between her eyes.

“Then we must forage from the enemy,” with a little nervous laugh. “You would never pass the sentry in the corridor wearing that suit. You will have to take the lieutenant’s coat and cap. Be quick about it — and — and you need not be particularly gentle on my account.”

“Nor on my own either — Fox informed me of what he told you.”

I was not long about the job, nor did Raymond make any resistance to the exchange forced upon him. In fact he acted like a man too completely dazed to even realize the indignity of his treatment, yet the way his eyes followed my every movement, and the smouldering hate in their depths, left me to doubt but what the fellow would prove dangerous enough, if ever he regained the power. I took no chances, binding him with greater care than before, and fitting a gag into his mouth to silence any possible cry for help. Noreen stood close to the door, apparently listening for some noise without, yet occasionally directing her glance toward us anxiously. I slipped into the lieutenant's coat, which fitted me snugly, and pulled his cap well down over my eyes. I bore no resemblance to the man, yet in the dark the difference might not be noticed.

“Are you ready?” she asked in a low whisper.

“Yes; but tell me your plan. I need to know what character I am to enact, — Raymond?”

“Not at first; not in the hall. That would be useless, as there is a light burning. Listen,” and she grasped my sleeve in both hands in her eagerness to explain. “Do you remember the way the corridor runs?”

“ I think so. This is the left branch of the main hallway. It is about four feet wide, and this is the third door from the turn. Am I right? ”

“ Yes, as nearly as I can recall. I did not notice closely. The light is at the intersection, a coal-oil lamp in a bracket against the wall. There is a sentry stationed outside this door — the Colonel’s orderly, I presume, but fully armed, and two others at the front entrance. These are twenty or thirty feet away, and out of sight from this door. I am not particularly afraid of passing them.”

“ It’s the fellow stationed here? ”

“ Yes, he will be suspicious of a stranger coming out with me, for he has seen everyone who came in.”

“ There is only one course to pursue then. We must trust to force, and a quick assault which will give the fellow no time to raise an alarm. You go out alone, leaving the door slightly ajar, and engage him in conversation. Did he appear to be genial when you met him before? ”

“ Yes, rather eager to talk — a young man.”

“ Good; then you can gain his attention for a moment. Stand so that his back will be to the door.”

“ You are not going to kill him? ”

“ There will be no necessity; once I get my grip the affair will be over — you understand? ”

Her lips were firmly set, her eyes gravely earnest.

The light fell full on her face. I could not refrain from touching her hand.

“You will let me thank you!”

“There is no need. I could do no less.”

“But few would show the bravery.”

“Bravery! Why I have exhibited none. Please do not speak of that — every moment now means so much. Yes, I understand perfectly; shall I go now?”

I nodded, drawing slightly back behind the door. Her words brought me no encouragement, no hope that this act had been inspired by any sentiment beyond that of mere friendliness and gratitude. She felt under obligation, and was paying the debt. I was to expect nothing more. Once I was safe beyond the lines, it was to be simply good-by — a parting forever. I set my teeth hard, conscious of the pain at my heart, but with my lesson learned. I could expect nothing else; I had been a fool to dream — now I would perform a man’s part, and hold to her respect at least. I thrust both revolvers into the belt I had retained; this was to be an affair of bare hands — swift, merciless, noiseless.

She grasped the latch of the door, lifted her eyes to mine for a bare instant; then opened it silently, and stepped out into the hall, her lips smiling, as she paused a moment to glance backward into the room.

"Very well, Colonel; I shall certainly take her your message," she said gaily, "and I thank you so much."

Her fingers released the latch, leaving the door standing ajar.

"Oh, sentry," she said pleasantly, but with guarded voice, "I know it is perfectly ridiculous, but a strand of hair has become entangled in this clasp. Would you kindly see if you can free it?"

"Certainly, Miss."

I heard him set down his musket against the wall, and step forward.

"On the other side," she suggested. "If you turn this way you will get the benefit of the light; it is caught in those crossed sabers, I think."

She stepped back as I gripped him, steadying the musket to keep it from being jarred to the floor. A gasp was all the sound he gave — a gasp, and one convulsive effort to break loose; but with the first jerk backward I had him off his feet, helpless, my arm circling his throat, holding him in a vise. I dragged him forward through the door, and flung him to the floor face downward.

"Not a cry, son," I commanded sternly. "I'll not shoot unless I have to. You are no worse off than your colonel. Hand me the rope cord in that upper desk drawer, Noreen; yes, that's it. Now,

Jack, put your hands behind you! Ah! you've done the same job in your day, no doubt — easy there, or you may get hurt. Now I'll turn you over, and bottle up your tongue; rather a surprise party, wasn't it?"

The fellow stared up at me, and grinned.

"You sure did put it over me that time," he admitted, a touch of genuine admiration in his voice. "I was like a baby, sir."

"You would have been if you had weighed a ton, the grip I had on you — I know the trade."

"Ay! yer do that; who are yer, may I ask?"

"The spy you fellows planned to hang in the morning," I answered, amused by his unexpected good humor. "Sorry, Jack, but I'll have to gag you."

"The pleasure is mine; don't mention it," and he winked facetiously, with a nod of his head toward the heavily breathing colonel. I bound a bit of rag over his mouth, more to give him an excuse for silence than because I had any fear he would raise an alarm. Noreen had silently opened the door, and slipped out into the corridor. With a swift glance over the three helpless men left behind, I joined her, and tightly closed the door. The light of the distant lamp revealed her face, but her eyes were serious.

"Better leave the musket leaning against the

wall," I whispered, noting she still grasped the weapon. "It will only arouse suspicion. There are two guards at the front entrance?"

"Yes," she answered swiftly, "and you had better give the word. If they stop you, and ask any questions, give any name you please — only you came with dispatches from General Ramsay two hours ago, and have been with Colonel Pickney ever since. It is less than an hour since the guard was relieved, for Captain Fox left me in order to make the rounds, and these men will not know. You understand?"

"Perfectly, and the countersign?"

"Kanawah."

I hesitated, and her eyes fell, the long lashes shading them completely.

"And you?" I asked, disappointed. "Do you mean to let me go out alone?"

"Would you think it best for us to go together?"

"It seems to me the guard would be far less apt to feel suspicion if I was accompanied by a lady whom they had already passed; they would recognize you."

The lashes uplifted again, and her eyes flashed into mine.

"Then I will go also," she said simply, "for I can guide you through the camp. I — I only thought

perhaps you might prefer to make the trial alone. Draw the cap visor lower down over your eyes — we may meet with someone who saw you brought in as a prisoner. That is better; now we will chat as we go — about — about West Point. Do you remember, Lieutenant, that last cadet dance? how beautifully the moon reflected on the Hudson? Why, that was the night when I first met you — wasn't it? I believe I like the cadet gray better than the blue. Captain Fox tells me — ”

We turned the corner into the wide entrance hall, strolling slowly side by side, her face turned upward to mine. Apparently my eyes were upon her, and I made some inane response to her words, yet I saw the sentries at the door come stiffly to attention, and then cross their musket barrels to bar our exit. I halted as though in surprise.

“Are there any new orders?” I asked in tone of authority. “You remember passing us in, do you not?”

“We passed the lady, sir,” the older man answered respectfully, “but no officer.”

“Ah, yes, I see; you are not the same men who were on guard when I arrived. I am Lieutenant Mann, of General Ramsay's staff, and have been with Colonel Pickney. The lady will vouch for me.”

"Yes, sir," yet with a lingering doubt in his voice. "No doubt it is all right, sir; but the orders are very strict tonight. If you have not the word I shall have to call the sergeant."

"Quite right, my man; but that is not necessary," and I took a step nearer and bent my head. "Kanawah."

The two men shouldered their muskets, and the older one brought his hand up in salute.

"Pass, sir," he said soberly, and stood aside. We went down the broad steps, dimly lighted by a distant fire, my hand touching her arm. At the foot a slight pressure served to guide me to the left, and we passed into the deeper shadow of the building without exchanging a word. The infantry camp lay between us and the road, while, on the side of the building where we were, were parked the empty wagons of a forage train. Teamsters, no doubt, were asleep beneath the covers, but there were no guards visible close to where we halted in the darkness. The campfire in front yielded just enough light to enable me to study out our surroundings. The band still played noisily in the courtroom above, the gay lilt of the dance music floating out through open windows. The hour must be nearly midnight, however, and the merrymaking would soon be ended. The camp was quiet, the soldiers apparently sleep-

ing on the ground. I could perceive only a few tents, showing white in the firelight, but the figures of sentries appeared here and there, slowly pacing their beats. An oil street lamp in front of the hotel gave dim view in that direction through the tangle of wagons parked between. A footpath led straight across, to a gate in the white picket fence, and a motionless figure stood there silhouetted against the light. I could not be sure, yet was convinced he must be a soldier on guard. Had I been alone I should have crept forward beneath the shadow of the wagons, and thus endeavored to slip by unseen, but I was conscious of the hand which grasped my sleeve, and my eyes fell to her face.

“You are my guide tonight,” I whispered softly. “Have you some plan already devised? There must be instant action.”

“Hardly that; this has all occurred so quickly, so unexpectedly, I have had no time in which to think. Only we — we cannot lose a moment. Those men will surely be found soon, and — and the dance must be nearly over. Isn’t it best to go straight ahead, and run the chance?”

“Past the guard yonder?”

“Yes; I am not greatly afraid of him! we have the word, and Captain Fox and I were together when I passed here before. He will remember me,

and have no suspicion. Only there may be officers sitting on the veranda of the hotel."

"It looks dark, and deserted, from here; and the hour is late."

"True; I can perceive no movement, and I suppose all who are not on duty are at the dance. Besides there is no other way in which you can attain the stables. I — I am ready to try it — are you?"

I answered with the pressure of my hand, on the fingers clasping my sleeve. There was no response; neither were they withdrawn. She gazed steadily down the path in the direction of the sentinel, drew a long breath, and stepped bravely forward. The way was clear, easily followed even in the darkness, and I walked close beside her. Within a few yards of the fellow she gave vent to a little ripple of laughter, barely enough to attract attention, and again slipped her hand into the support of my arm.

"That was the funniest thing, Lieutenant," she exclaimed gaily. "I have laughed since every time I have thought of how he looked when he fell. Really I don't think I ever met a more awkward person — certainly never danced with one. Ah, sentry, has Captain Fox returned yet?"

"Not along this path, Miss," he answered respectfully, touching his cap in salute to me. The soldier stood at attention, but made no effort whatever

to bar our progress; he was a middle-aged man, with a chin beard, his voice a soft drawl.

"When he returns," I said quietly, "please tell him that Lieutenant Mann is waiting to see him at the hotel."

"Yes, sir; Lieutenant Mann?"

"Of General Ramsay's staff," added the girl pleasantly. "He may not remember your name, Lieutenant."

"Yes, of Ramsay's — you'll not forget?"

"No, sir; I've got it all right."

We strolled on slowly, passing directly beneath the glare of the lamp. We attempted to talk, but I retain no memory of a single word that was uttered. My heart was beating like an engine, and my throat was dry, the fingers of one hand gripping the butt of a revolver in my belt. I was dimly aware of the tremor in her voice, the pressing closer to me of her slender figure. We passed out beyond the glow of the revealing light, to where our eyes were able to sweep the darkened porch. There were a dozen chairs standing back of the rail, but none were occupied. She gave a little sob of relief, both hands nervously grasping my sleeve.

"Thank God!" she said fervently, "now if we only have five minutes more!"

CHAPTER XXII

A STEP NEARER



HE stables?" I asked. "What horses are there?"

"Officers' mounts; but there were several others tied at the hitch rail an hour ago. Two or three civilians rode over from Beckley to attend the dance. These will be easier to get, as they are not guarded."

"You saw them?"

"When they arrived — yes; they appeared to be good stock; better even than the government horses."

I could perceive them dimly, now they were pointed out, from where we skulked in the shadow of the building, but they were so bunched together it was impossible to distinguish the number.

"They will be all equipped?"

"Yes — they were simply ridden in, and tied. I was sitting on the porch here with Captain Fox, and do not remember seeing one unsaddled."

I took a step or two forward, circling the house, so as to better approach the animals along the shadow of an orchard fence. I knew she followed close at my heels, although I did not glance around,

my whole attention concentrated on the work before me. I saw nothing to cause alarm, and heard no unusual sound. I do not know yet where the fellow came from, but he must have been crouching down within the shadow of the cellar door, which stood wide open. What he was, who he was, I shall never know, nor the cause of his savage attack. He was a soldier, with cartridge belt on, and musket in hand as though on duty, yet if he was a guard posted there, why did he fail to challenge? It is my thought the man had left his post and was looting the cellar; perhaps was drunk, and mistook me for an officer who had discovered him. I recall pausing an instant, and staring down the dark steps, but I saw nothing, and passed on. I could not have taken two steps, when Noreen gave utterance to a sharp cry, and, instinctively, I sprang swiftly aside, flinging up an arm to protect my head. The blow struck and glanced off, terribly bruising arm and shoulder, the force of it flinging me to the ground. I staggered to my knees, jerking a revolver from the belt, my brain dazed, and one hand numb and useless. Before I could turn entirely about, or perceive anything, there sounded a muffled oath and a crash; then I had a glimpse of the girl alone leaning above the open cellar-way. I managed to gain my feet, and get close enough to touch her dress.

“What is it? What has happened?”

“Oh!” she started, and looked at me scarce able to speak. “You are not killed? not even badly hurt?”

“A hard crack only; I cannot move my arm. It was your cry which saved my head. Who struck the blow? I saw nothing.”

“A soldier; he came up out of here,” her voice trembling. “I do not think he saw me at all. He — he just seemed to leap forward out of the dark, and struck one blow with his musket — see, it lies here.”

“He dropped it, and ran?”

She hid her face in her hands, and I could feel the trembling of her body.

“No! I — I do not know how it happened. I — I caught hold of him suddenly from behind just as he struck. That — that must have frightened him, for — for he reeled back, missed his footing, and went down. He — he just swore once, and I saw his face; then his gun struck against me, and — and he tumbled over backward, and went crunching against something down there. He — he hasn’t moved since.”

I waited an instant listening, conscious of the pain in my arm, and more fearful that the noise of the encounter had reached the ears of the guard at the

gate, than of the silent form below. Then I crept down the steps, until I touched the stone slabs at the bottom of the cellar. I had to feel about blindly in the darkness to locate the fellow, but the first touch of his flesh told me he was dead. He lay at full length, his head curled to one side, his neck broken. I could feel the buttons on his uniform blouse, the bulge of his cartridge belt. Without a word I crawled back into the open air, and got a glimpse of her frightened face.

“The fellow is dead,” I said softly. “We have no cause to fear him.”

“But I did not kill him! Why, I could not; he — he just stepped back, and fell.”

“There is no reason why you should worry about that,” I urged, taking her hands from before her face, and clasping them in mine. “His death was an accident, although his attack was murderous enough, and he deserved his fate.”

“Was — was he a soldier?”

“Yes, an infantry private, I think. Now don’t cry. Listen to me, your nerves are all unstrung; this night’s work has been too much for you — too much for any girl. And God knows, you have done enough for me already. Where are you stopping? here at the hotel?”

“Y — yes.”

“Then slip inside while there is no one hanging around; and get safely to your own room. There is nothing more you can do. I will take one of those horses yonder, and be off, and I know the country well enough to find my way. Once in the mountains I shall be safe. You will do as I say?”

To my surprise she looked straight into my face, standing motionless. She seemed to catch her breath, as though it was difficult to speak.

“You mean that? that I am to go to my room?” she asked slowly.

“Certainly; that will be the safest and best thing for you to do. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you; nothing I can ever do will repay the service you have rendered me. You are a wonderfully brave girl.”

“Do you think so? Oh, but I am neither brave, nor wonderful. I have scarcely known what I was doing; it didn’t seem as if there was anything else I could do. But I know now; I have no doubt any more — unless — unless you refuse to let me.”

“I refuse! I do not understand what I could refuse. All that remains is for you to go to your room.”

“But if I do not go there? if I — if I ride away with you!”

“But, Noreen, that would not be right; it would

expose you to terrible danger. Think of the days and nights of travel, of hiding and exposure, before I can hope to attain the safety of the Confederate lines; and there is no need of such a sacrifice — you will be perfectly safe here.”

“How will I be safe here?” she asked indignantly. “Do you suppose they will spare me, merely because I am a woman? This has not been done in secret; there are too many who know my part in your escape to ever keep the truth hidden. Colonel Pickney will have to make his report, and shield himself from blame. There is not an officer here who will stand openly in my defense, unless it be Captain Fox, and he could not help me. Is it under such conditions you desire I remain here?”

“But do you realize what going with me will inevitably mean?”

“Yes, I realize — not only the peril and hardship, but every issue involved. I made my choice back in the courthouse. It is too late to withdraw.”

She paused as though unable to find expression, breathing heavily, and her face sank until I could no longer see her eyes.

“When — when I told Colonel Pickney that — that you were my husband,” she faltered, driven to it by my continued silence, “I spoke hastily, it is true; for my only thought just then was the necessity

for saving your life. I felt that — that I could do no less, and — and I desired to justify my action. They — they had to know why I did it; do you not understand? I — I am a Union woman; they have trusted me always, these men; even tonight they told me the countersign because of confidence in my loyalty. I — I was the daughter of an officer on General Ramsay's staff. I could not let those men think me a traitor. I — I had to tell them why it had become my duty to aid you. There was no other possible way; no other reason which would justify me in such an act; but — but that confession left me utterly in your power."

"In my power, Noreen! Surely you do not think that I will ever take advantage? that I will ever misconstrue your real purpose?"

"No! but will you live up to the obligation? Oh, you do not see the situation at all! When I said you were my husband I threw myself on your protection. I — I burned the boats. I am all alone now, unless — unless you stand by me. My father is dead; there is not one person anywhere to whom I can go. If I remain here I shall be placed under arrest before daylight — charged with aiding your escape; perhaps charged with the death of this soldier — and I have no friends, no defense. Tom, I must go on with you!"

I saw it all clearly enough now, although her situation was not quite as desperate to my mind as it appeared to her. Yet it might result even as she feared, for Pickney would certainly be furious at the indignity of his treatment, and Raymond was of a disposition to seek revenge; while all I knew regarding Ramsay was, that he was a rigid disciplinarian, little given to acts of mercy. I could not ignore her plea, nor would I misconstrue it. It was fear which thus drove her to me; she had more confidence in my kindness than in their justice — that was the whole story. The poor girl was so frightened she had chosen blindly — she could perceive nothing, realize nothing, except the necessity for immediate escape. My own resolve was instant.

“Do not say any more, Noreen,” I said soberly, but making no attempt to touch her. “I understand now. You mean you wish to ride with me?”

“Yes.”

“It will be a hard journey, and I cannot guess the end. But you trust me fully?”

“Yes.”

“We are to be friends, real friends?”

“I trust you; is not that enough? All I ask now is, do not leave me here alone.”

Her fingers clasped my coat, her eyes suddenly lifted to my face.

"Promise me that, Tom," she begged brokenly. "It will be all I ask."

"Surely; we will go together," and I gripped her hands tightly in mine. "Whatever happens I will do my best. But we must go at once."

"Yes, and — and thank you."

We crept forward along the shadow of the orchard fence, until we mingled with the horses fastened at the hitching rail. There were seven altogether tied there, and I selected among them, as best I could in the darkness, two that seemed well adapted to our purpose. I helped her silently into the saddle, thrusting one of my revolvers into the empty holster, and then mounted myself. There had been no noise, no disturbance, and the sleeping camp behind remained quiet. Only one light gleamed from an upper window of the hotel, and we were safely beyond its reflection. The girl was but a dim shape, the riding cloak she wore completely hiding her form. I could no longer distinguish the sound of distant music, but the courthouse was still aglow.

"Which way had we better go?" I asked, my face close, our horses touching.

"Along the south road at first; there is a cut-off just back of the old school."

"And the pickets? do you know where they are posted?"

“At the ford of the Green Briar — the main ford.”

“There are none at Benton?”

“No; I do not think they even know the river is fordable there; it is not on the maps.”

We rode forward slowly, my hand on her bridle rein, keeping in the deeper shadows along the side of the road, until we passed beyond the last house of the village. I felt no fear of encountering the pickets posted at the Green Briar, for the wood trail she mentioned, leading off just this side of the old red schoolhouse, would take us a quarter of a mile east. If we could attain Benton's Crossing before daylight our chances of getting hidden in the mountains were most excellent. If the camp was not alarmed for another half hour, our pursuers would be given a hard task. Strange, though, that the Federal scouts had never located the Benton ford. To be sure it was narrow, and of no value in high water, yet an ideal place for raiding parties to cross, and all those hills beyond were full of guerrilla bands eager to strike quick and get safely away. That they dared to attack small bodies of troops, and especially poorly guarded wagon trains, had been demonstrated more than once, and this secret ford gave them easy opportunity. The Cowans certainly knew of its feasibility, and the wonder was

they had never utilized it before. The longer I thought the more I began to dread the unknown dangers ahead — the gauntlet we must run before attaining the Confederate lines. We could baffle pursuit, but if once we came into contact with those irregulars of the mountains — merciless, irresponsible — no one could predict the result. And every mile of the way we must now traverse lay directly through their country — a region bare, inhospitable, open to all the nameless horror of civil war, where men fought like wolves, and woman suspected every stranger. I glanced aside at the girl, riding so silently at my side, but she was a mere shadow in that darkness. Should I tell her the fear that almost paralyzed me, now that I faced it clearly? Should I compel her to return, and permit me to go on alone? I could skulk along through the night, discard my horse, travel afoot, and thus avoid encountering any of those villains. I was myself a mountaineer, and knew the secret trails — alone, on foot, with no one else to care for, or defend, I could discover some unguarded passage. But with her beside me, the two of us mounted, such a feat was almost impossible. I must find her food and shelter, and we could not travel on horseback without leaving a trail unconcealed. To be sure I knew her of old; that she was strong, resourceful, fearless — yet she was a woman

to be protected from insult, to be guarded against exposure; more, she was the woman I loved.

But would she be in any less danger if I compelled her to return to Lewisburg? To be sure nothing worse than imprisonment would be her fate at the hands of the Federal authorities — but she would be exposed to indignities, to almost certain persecution from Raymond. If I understood the inner nature of the fellow his one thought now would be revenge, and he would halt at nothing in an attempt to attain it. I believed she feared him more than all else; that she would prefer the exposure and danger of the mountains rather than remain alone within the scope of his power.

“Noreen,” I said, turning my face toward her. “Do you really think it best to try this ride with me?”

“You do not wish me to go?” she asked, as instantly reining up. “You want me to return?”

“No, not that. I have no thought, but for your own good. Only do you understand the perils through which we must pass in those mountains?”

“Yes, I do understand,” she answered soberly, “and I comprehend, as you cannot, the danger of my returning to Lewisburg. I will never go back there; but, if you think it best for us to part, I will endeavor to reach Charleston alone.”

“You would rather go on with me?”

“I made that choice, but if you consider me a burden —”

“No, it is not that, Noreen,” I interrupted, touched by the regretful tone of her voice. “It was of you I was thinking; not myself. Then we go on together?”

She was silent, her eyes on the darkness ahead.

“It must be your decision,” I insisted.

“I made my choice an hour ago,” she answered frankly.

I waited an instant, thinking she might say more, but she sat motionless in the saddle. Just what her decision signified I could not judge. It seemed to me that between two dangers she had simply chosen the one she deemed to be the lesser. It was not affection for me, but fear of others, which urged her forward. Grasping her bridle rein I rode on through the dark without another word. The decision had been made; now we must both of us abide the consequences.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RAIDERS PASS



THE schoolhouse, appearing a mere blur on the side of the hill, we turned west, following a narrow weed-grown bridle path through a tangle of second growth timber. Seemingly no one had traveled this way for months, and I had to dismount in order to discover the choked passage. It was small wonder its existence had been overlooked by hurrying Federal scouts, and left unguarded. Benton's cabin had been burned six months ago, Noreen told me, and the old man was believed to be dead. Few others ever used this cut-off, or had occasion to pass this way, and the weeds had quickly taken possession. I was obliged to feel for the worn trail, as it wound here and there along the slope of the hill, and then finally down a shallow depression toward the river bank. The horses stepped cautiously, pressed closely together in the narrow rut, and the only noise was the occasional stumble of a hoof. Where the cabin formerly stood on a point of land, nothing remained visible but a gaunt chimney, and the remnant of a rail fence. I skirted this latter, guided by

the shining of the water of the river beyond, and thus we came down to the shore. My memory of the spot was hazy and uncertain, and I stared across at the black woods opposite, shading my eyes in an endeavor to distinguish some forgotten landmark.

"Have you ever crossed here?" I asked doubtfully. "I scarcely remember where the ford lies."

"Yes," she replied, leaning forward, "with my father a year ago. Benton came down and showed us the course; but I did not think much then of what he said. We took the water directly in front of the house, here at the end of the point, and — oh, yes; there was a dead tree with one great limb forking out on the other bank, we were to aim directly for. Can you see anything like that?"

I hollowed my hands and looked, but nothing along the opposite shore appeared with any distinctness — it was a mere blur of trees.

"Was the ford straight across?"

"I think slightly to the left; another point juts out there. See, the river is narrower right across in that direction," and she pointed. "I am sure we only partly met the current. There is something dark against the sky now; higher up above the tree line. I am not sure that is the dead limb, but it must be almost directly in line. Do you see what I mean?"

“Yes; at least I imagine so. We must risk it.”

I swung up into the saddle, and resumed my grasp of her horse's rein.

“We'll ride together, but keep your feet free in the stirrups. If your horse misses his footing let go of everything else, and cling to his tail; he'll tow you ashore, and you used to swim.”

“So you remember my accomplishments? I am not in the least frightened. Don't worry about me,” and she held out her hand. “You'll not find me a bad soldier.”

“I am certain of that — not if you are still the same girl I played with.”

Her hand was in mine, and was not withdrawn.

“I — hardly think I am,” she answered soberly, a little catch in her voice. “I am not a girl at all any more, but I keep something of the same spirit, I hope.”

I have never understood what spell there was about her to keep me silent. I had never before lacked audacity, yet I dare not speak the words that were on my lips. Whether the personality of the girl held me embarrassed, or the peculiarity of our relationship, I do not know. Surely there was nothing in her manner, or words, to indicate such a thing, yet the thought had taken firm possession of my mind that she was the victim of circumstances; that she

accompanied me merely to escape from threatened danger; that her graciousness was largely acting, and that she would remain a companion only so long as I continued respectfully attentive. I knew I loved her; I felt now that I had loved her ever since we were boy and girl together. The touch of her hand sent a wild thrill through me, and my heart throbbed to the memory that she was actually my wife. But I dare not permit her to even guess the truth, for I felt that she regretted the weakness of that moment and would resent the slightest reference to it. I could only hope that time, and courtesy combined, would awaken her interest in me. If I could serve her quietly, the very love I gave might arouse response — but not yet.

I released her hand, venturing upon no reply, and we rode down the steep bank into the black water. The horses advanced slowly, cautiously, and I made little effort to guide them, although from that lower level, I felt assured I saw the fork of the dead tree silhouetted against the sky above the opposite bank. There were a few stars out, and their light reflected along the surface of the water, the faint gleam more confusing than helpful. The current was strong, but steady, and the stream deepened rapidly, until we were obliged to lift our feet to keep them dry. The bottom seemed to be rock strewn, and occasionally

the horses stumbled, splashing us with water; once her mount stepped into a hole, and plunged desperately to regain footing, but the girl never uttered a sound, and my grip held. Half-way across I was certain as to the dead tree, and aimed our course straight by its guidance. The sullen sweep of the water, out of the darkness above, into the darkness below, and the brooding silence, lay hold on my nerves. The black shore we were approaching was full of mystery, forest shrouded.

“What is over there?” I asked, unable to keep still, and feeling the companionship of my own voice.

“Nothing; just a trail through a strip of woods up a long hill. The river road is only a few rods back — the road to Hot Springs.”

“There is no house near?”

“Only the old Cowan place, two miles south, but that has been burned down.”

“And to the northeast?”

“I have never been that way.”

Nor had I, yet it seemed to me that was by far the safer course for us to follow. Cowan's gang was to the south, their headquarters somewhere in Monroe County. No doubt the range of mountains we must cross would prove the rendezvous of other bands no less dangerous, but we would be safer with any of them than in the hands of Cowan. Besides

that upper country was occasionally patrolled by troops, and the guerrillas would be less aggressive in consequence. It would be comparatively easy to avoid the soldiers, for we would not attempt to travel by daylight.

The water began to shallow, and we drew in under the shadows of the wooded bank. It was so dark I could discover no break in the forest growth, and was obliged to dismount, and wade about on foot before I could locate the narrow path that led up out of the water. This mounted steeply, a mere gash cut through the tangled undergrowth, compelling us to advance in single file, I ahead leading my horse. The passage was so narrow and rough that caution was impossible in that darkness; we must venture, and trust to luck. So we pushed our way through to the top of the rise, and came suddenly to an open space, where a dozen acres had been cleared, the stumps of trees still standing in a field of weeds. I would have plunged straight ahead had not Noreen halted me with a low cry of warning while we were yet hidden within the wood shadow.

"There is a man over yonder," she said in a breathless whisper. "Ay, more — see! They come toward us."

I was not sure I saw, yet I backed the horses into the thicket, and stood at their heads, gripping their

nostrils. Noreen slipped from her saddle, and joined me, peering out through the interlaced branches. Over her shoulder I glimpsed a section of the open field, and saw the dim, indistinct shadows advancing. They were men on foot, walking so closely bunched as to make it impossible to distinguish their number. The leader, a yard or two in advance, apparently knew the way well, and the others pressed on after him across the open ground almost on a dog trot. Indeed, they were upon us before we gained more than a swift glimpse of them, plunging into the narrow opening that led down to the river. There was no attempt at silence, their hurrying feet stirring up the dead leaves, and voices calling out warnings along the line, or raised in sudden profanity. The noise thus made, saved us from discovery, the horses moving restlessly in spite of our efforts at control; but without suspicion the file swept past, scarcely a dozen feet from where we stood, and disappeared in the dense blackness below. I counted thirty-three men, vague, shapeless shadows, each bearing a gun, and, as the last straggler crashed by, and disappeared, I felt Noreen's hands clasp my arm, and glanced at her.

“They have all gone,” I said reassuringly.

“Yes, I know,” her words a whisper. “Do you know who they are?”

“Only to make a guess. They were shadows rather than men — but they were not soldiers.”

“That was Cowan’s gang,” she said positively. “It was Anse in the lead.”

“How in Heaven’s name do you know that?” I asked astounded. “Can you see in the dark?”

“I recognized him out yonder in the open. I knew his hat, and the way he walked. Their leader was Anse Cowan.”

I waited an instant listening, and in the silence we could hear the splashing of water as the fellows plunged forward into the river. One voice spoke loud enough to reach us clearly, and was recognized.

“That was Anse,” I acknowledged. “What can those fellows be after — the picket guard below?”

“They would not need so many men for that, would they?” hesitatingly. “Perhaps they are seeking me.”

“You! Do you imagine they would dare invade the very Federal camp for such a purpose?”

“They have done things fully as desperate,” she insisted. “If some spy has brought word of the situation, there would not be any great danger. There are no guards about the hotel, and they could raid it swiftly and get away without alarming the sentries at the courthouse. There is still time before day-break.”

I laughed at the thought.

"I hope your theory is true," I said, "for it will leave us an open road. 'Twas luck we did not meet the fellows below. Come, Noreen, we cannot wait here speculating; we'll make good use of those two hours."

I led the horses into the open, and helped her up into the saddle. Her hand as I touched it, was cold and wet.

"You are frightened," I whispered, "but the danger is past."

"Oh, I know; but I cannot tell you how I dread that man. Even as a child I feared him, and his father — and — and now —" she shivered as though from chill.

"You are safe enough out of his clutches at last. They are afoot, and can never overtake us. Don't lose your nerve, Noreen."

I mounted my own horse, and we rode out boldly across the open field. There was a narrow fringe of trees guarding the outer edge, and beyond these we came to the Hot Springs pike, clearly visible beneath the soft gleam of the stars. Satisfied that all immediate danger had been left behind, and eager to advance as far as possible before daylight, I urged the horses into swifter stride. It was, as I remembered, forty miles to Hot Springs over a mountain road. If

we could make ten of these before we were obliged to seek shelter, it would bring us well into the foothills of the Alleghanies, with plenty of hiding places near by — ay! and there must be cabins also back in those valleys where food could be obtained. With Anse Cowan, and his crew, off on an expedition in the opposite direction, I felt a confidence which yielded fresh audacity — it was going to be easier than I had supposed. Another night — our horses rested and fed — would bring us safely into Hot Springs, and beyond that point the road would be comparatively clear.

The pike had been well built, and was still in good condition. Armies had not marched this way, and the surface was unrutted by cannon wheels, or ploughed up by cavalry hoofs. No doubt forage trains had traversed it from end to end, and many a scouting party of troopers, but these had left few signs of their passage. We rode swiftly, the star-gleam sufficient for guidance. Noreen did not speak, did not even glance toward me, her horse keeping even stride with mine, her slender figure, shapeless in its draping cavalry cape, bent slightly forward. The road lay like a white ribbon between its fringe of trees, winding about to avoid the hills; once, afar off to the left, I caught the glimmer of distant water.

I know not how long we rode, or how far, for my

mind had drifted into a review of the night's adventures, and a plan for the morrow. We met with no one, heard no noise except the steady pounding of our horses' hoofs. I do not recall that we exchanged a word, except once, when an oddly shaped stump by the roadside caused me to pull up suddenly, believing I saw the crouching figure of a man. A little later the sky to the east began to lighten in the promise of dawn. We climbed a long hill, our horses slowing to the ascent, and by the time we attained the summit the gray light revealed our faces. I looked across at her, and her eyes, uplifted suddenly to mine, smiled.

"You are worn out," I said.

"I — I am tired," she confessed. "I — I have been two days and nights without sleep. If I could only rest for an hour —"

"You shall — all day long. We will find a place in which to hide down there in the valley."

The road led winding down between rocky banks, but it was still too dark below for us to discern the nature of the descent. We had to ride with care, pebbles causing the horses to slip, but, at last, came forth into a narrow valley, hemmed in by great hills, and watered by a small stream. The valley was wooded, but not heavily, and the road cut directly across. As we paused to let the thirsty animals

drink, the increasing daylight gave me glimpse of a bridle path skirting the edge of the stream along the west bank. Beyond doubt it led to some squatter's cabin, hidden away under protection of the overhanging hill, and, whether occupied or not, promised shelter, and possibly food. I pointed the dim trail out to her, and dismounted, with the purpose of exploring.

"Stay here just a moment until I see where the path leads," I said, holding up my rein.

"I would rather go with you."

"But the horses," I protested, "and I will not be long."

"Let us take them back into the woods, and tie them, and go together," she pleaded. "I do not know why I am so nervous; I—I am ashamed of myself, but I do not want to be left here alone."

I laughed, yet the expression of her face proved the truth of her words, and I helped her down.

"All right," I assented cheerfully. "There is probably nothing more dangerous ahead of us than a deserted cabin, but we'll take the venture together. Here, let me take the reins."

I led the animals far enough back to be well out of sight from the road, hitching them securely behind a thicket of undergrowth. She followed me closely, grasping her skirt with one hand, and, with-

out retracing our steps, I pushed deeper through the brush, and attained the patch, which followed closely the curvature of the stream. By this time it was light enough so we could see clearly. The passage was overgrown with grass, and gave no evidence of having been lately traveled. There were hoof-marks, but they were old. We must have advanced a hundred yards, when I came upon an axe with a broken handle, and near by marks on the bank showing where a man had knelt on his knees to drink. The path turned sharply to the right here, and as we mounted to the slightly higher ground we could see the cabin perched on a little knoll, against the black hill behind.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIGHT IN THE CABIN



FROM where we halted in uncertainty only one end of the cabin could be perceived through the intervening trees, and it appeared old, neglected, and partly demolished. But for the signs along the bank of the creek, showing the late passage of a man, I would have instantly jumped to the conclusion that the place had been long ago deserted and abandoned. Surely nothing about the shanty, or its immediate surroundings, indicated present occupancy. Yet with this memory in mind, when I finally advanced it was with caution, and a strange sense of expectation. Indeed, I avoided the open path entirely, pressing a way through the underbrush under the tree shadows, until I gained the edge of the little opening in which the hut stood. Noreen followed closely behind, treading almost in my footsteps, as noiseless as a fawn, her skirts held close about her limbs. At the edge of the woods, still dark with the lingering night shadows, we paused side by side, parting the leaves to stare wonderingly at the silent log walls. It was a one-roomed cabin, a mere shell,

erected no doubt by some lonely squatter who had no desire to be discovered, and stood squarely against the steep side of the hill. Apparently there was no rear opening, and the single door in front was securely closed. The end toward us, however, contained a narrow window, unprotected even by glass, and its wooden shutter hung dejectedly on one hinge. No smoke arose above the tottering chimney, and the whole place appeared a deserted wreck.

“Wait here until I get a closer view,” I whispered. “I shall be within sight all the time.”

“Surely no one lives there.”

“No; the place must have been deserted for years, but someone has been up this way within a few hours. It is best to be sure.”

She stood motionless as I went crouching forward, keeping well to the front of the cabin until I was safely against the wall. Without venturing to try the door I raised myself cautiously on the end of a projecting log, and peered in through the slit of a window. As the only light reaching that interior found entrance through this narrow opening I found some difficulty at first in distinguishing objects within. I had to thrust my head well forward in order to see at all, and then, slowly as my eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, I picked out various objects. The cabin was not deserted in

spite of its desolate outward appearance. It bore every evidence of late occupancy, although I could perceive no movement to indicate any human presence. I stared about the one room, which contained a rough table, two or three stools, and a bunk in the further corner. A bottle and two tin plates stood on the table, and the end of a ragged quilt dangled from the edge of the bunk nearly to the floor. Opposite me was an open fire-place, an iron kettle sitting in the ashes, while a short-barreled rifle stood upright in a corner. On one of the stools lay a broad-brimmed hat, and a pair of ragged corduroy pants hung on a wooden peg beside the door. The latter was unbarred, the heavy slab of wood leaning against the log wall. There was an opening above leading into the attic, but no ladder.

I grasped these details swiftly, but my gaze lingered on the bunk, uncertain as to whether or not it might be occupied. The shadows prevented my seeing distinctly, yet there was no movement, no sound of breathing, and I became convinced no form rested concealed under that edge of ragged quilt. There had certainly been a late occupant — perhaps during the past night. But, whoever the fellow might be — some hider-out probably — he had departed before daylight. He would likely be the same one who had knelt at the stream to drink. The

unbarred door was proof enough that the cabin was now deserted, the only question arising in my mind being occasioned by the rifle standing in the corner. Why had that been left?

Still there was no denying the evidence of my own eyes, and here was shelter and food. If the fellow returned he was only one man, and not to be greatly feared. The lady must rest before we passed another night in the saddle, and the place looked fairly clean, and was safe enough from the prying eyes of any passers by along the pike. I stepped down from the support on which I stood, and motioned to her to join me. She emerged from out her leafy covert, and I waited, my eyes upon her, as she came swiftly forward. In spite of the lines of weariness in her face the light of the dawn revealed a beauty that caused my heart to throb. Her eyes silently questioned me, and I explained quickly what discovery I had made.

“But the man may return,” she said doubtfully.

“Of course, although I imagine he has disappeared for the day. If he is hiding out he may not dare to remain here in daylight. Anyway you can rest safely, for I am not in need of any sleep. I napped in my cell yesterday, and just a short doze will serve me. But you are terribly tired—it is in your eyes.”

“Yes,” she confessed, “I must sleep somewhere.”

“Then come; we’ll find a bite to eat, and a place for you to lie down.”

I opened the door noiselessly, although I took no special precaution, and held it wide, while she stepped across the threshold, and stood looking curiously about. Then I closed it behind us, and we were in a sort of twilight, amid which objects appeared rather indistinct.

“Ah,” I said, “the fellow’s cupboard must be over yonder. I hope he keeps it well stocked.”

I stepped across in front of her, with no other thought than that of exploring the larder, when she gave vent to a startled cry, and I stopped suddenly, sweeping my eyes about to learn the cause of alarm. The ragged quilt was on the floor, and a man leaped across the room, and grasped the rifle in the corner. I saw the swift movement, realized the purpose, yet had scarcely time to draw a revolver from the belt, before he had hand on the weapon, and whirled savagely about facing us. For the instant the gloom disfigured his face — all I knew was that he was a big fellow, with ragged, untrimmed hair, and a scraggly beard. I stepped forward, and flung up my arm.

“Drop it!” I said shortly. “Lift that gun, and you’re dead!”

At first I thought him crazy enough to take the



A big fellow, with ragged, untrimmed hair, and a scraggly beard

chance of my fire; then the big fingers relaxed, and the rifle fell clattering to the floor. To my surprise the fellow laughed.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” he chortled, “you here?”

He threw back his head, and I recognized him — Jem Taylor, old Ned Cowan. I drew a quick breath, my teeth clinched, my arm steady. This encounter was going to prove no boy’s play. But what was the man’s game? Did he not know yet who I was? or what I knew about him? Before I could answer, his harsh voice spoke again.

“Put down yer pop-gun, boy, an’ take it easy — the blame thing mout go off. I reckon as how we all hav’n’t got nuthin’ ter fight over, hav’ we? How ther Sam Hill did yer ever git yere?”

“Now wait,” I broke in coldly, determined to have a straight understanding. “I don’t know what you are trying to pretend, but there is no friendship between us. You stand just where you are. I am not sure whether you know me, or not; but I know you, Ned Cowan — I know what you did at Hot Springs, and how you took me along so as to make others believe I was guilty — ”

“Shucks, lad; ’twas no more than a fair fight.”

“It was cold-blooded murder, Cowan!” I exclaimed indignantly, “the culmination of a feud.”

“Huh! who told yer that?”

I stepped aside, but still held him under the muzzle of my revolver. The change in posture brought the man face to face with Noreen; I saw him lean forward, and gaze at her; then recoil, as though he viewed a ghost. She never moved, never spoke.

“Good Lord!” he muttered. “Is that Harwood’s girl?”

“Yes; now you know how I know, and that there is nothing but war between us. The lady is my wife.”

His face was ashen gray, his thin lips set in a straight, hard line.

“Your wife! and you in that Yankee uniform! Who the hell are you? Why you are a blame liar! You told me you was a Confed, sergeant of artillery, and — your wife! Why, damn it, man, the major never even knew yer!”

“He failed to recognize me,” I admitted. “But I’ll tell you who I am, and how I came here. I am Thomas Wyatt, the son of Judge Wyatt, who used to hold court in Lewisburg. You ought to remember him, for you were before him twice — you and your son Anse; and I am, as I told you before, a sergeant of artillery in the Confederate service.”

“Ther hell yer say.”

“Why I am here is no business of yours,” I went on coldly. “But I am the officer who escaped your gang in the mountains three nights ago; and I am the officer who was at the Harwood house when Anse, and his precious crew of cutthroats, broke in.”

“The feller who did up Parson Nichols?”

“Yes.”

“An’ yer say yer married ter the girl? Who ever married yer?”

“Nichols did. He never told you that part of the story, I reckon? He thought it might prejudice Anse against him. Well, this is the way it was, Cowan. The lady realized that her choice lay between myself and Anse, and must have considered me the lesser of two evils.”

“An’ — an’ Pop Nichols married yer, while — while Anse was a breakin’ in?”

“Exactly — rather romantic, wasn’t it?”

He burst into a harsh laugh, not altogether pleasant.

“Romantic — hell! But it wus som’ joke on Anse. Why he’s out huntin’ after her now — ”

He stopped, cursing fiercely to himself; but I saw fit to follow the lead given.

“So that is what he is up to? He and his outfit passed us just this side of Benton’s ford. And they were bound for Lewisburg, you say?”

“Thar, or tharabouts.”

“But, man, there were only thirty-five men I counted, and there are five hundred Yanks in the town.”

His eyes shifted their gaze from the face of the girl to mine. They were narrow cat eyes, cruel and cunning.

“I reckon I ain’t seen ol’ Harwood’s gal afore in maybe five year,” he said slowly, “but she has sure growed up fine. Anse took after marryin’ her furst jist ter spite Harwood, but since he seed her a while back he’s sorter took a notion thet he wants her hisself. I reckon I don’t blame him. Thet’s why he wouldn’t wait, but set out ternight. No, I don’t reckon, young fellar, it’s no particular risk. Yer a sojer an’ don’t jest understand how we fight out yere in the mountings. We jest strike quick, an’ then git away. ’Tain’t so much of a trick Anse is a playing at over at Lewisburg. Sure thar’s five hundred Yanks thar; an’ if thar wus five thousand it wouldn’t make no great difference the way the guard is sot. The whol’ blame caboodle is camped in the courthouse yard, an’ the only picket is at the main ford o’ the Green Briar. Yer never saw nobody, did yer, gittin’ out yere?”

“No,” I admitted, realizing his intimate knowledge. “The camp is poorly protected.”

“I reckon it is, and Anse knows that just as well as you do. An’ he knows the gal yere had a room at ther hotel. Thar is where he went, aimin’ fer ter raid the shebang just afore daylight.” He laughed again mirthlessly. “By God, but Anse will be some mad when he finds out whut has happened. I reckon he’ll ’bout cut yer heart out.”

“He will have to get me first.”

“Oh, don’t yer ever worry none ’bout thet, young fellar. Anse will sure git yer; he knows every bridle-path ’cross these mountings, an’ I wouldn’t give a continental damn fer no chance you’ve got fer ter git away. He’s a tiger cat on a trail, Anse is — an’ besides the blame fool wants the gal. He ain’t no Cowan if he lets you beat him outer her.” He glanced quickly across my shoulder toward the door. Perhaps she moved; perhaps it was all imagination, but I thought I heard a noise, and wheeled partly around, my eyes for an instant deserting old Cowan’s face. It was his once chance, and he took it. I sensed the spring, even as Noreen’s cry of warning broke the silence, but not in time to escape the grip of the old man’s iron fingers. His body crashed against me with such force that I staggered and fell; one hand closed like a vise on my throat, the other gripped the stock of my revolver, crushing my fingers lifeless. I struck against the edge of the

table, struggling vainly to keep my feet. It went over with a crash, bearing us both along, old Ned atop, clutching fiercely to keep his hold, his eyes blazing madly down into mine. As we struck I wrenched my hand free, and pulled the trigger. The shot seemed to blaze across my own breast, burning like fire, and, the next instant, the man's knee crushed my wrist to the floor, and the revolver fell from my benumbed fingers.

I seem to recall little of what followed; only a confused recollection of desperate struggling amid the legs of the overturned table; of oaths, blows; of eyes glaring revengefully into mine. I could not break his death grip on my throat, nor throw off the weight of his big body. I did get my hands free, and one leg curved under me. With this as a lever I twisted partly aside, driving my fist twice into the fellow's face, and twining fingers into his coarse hair. But I could not breathe; he was choking the life out of me; everything grew red—I saw the girl's frightened face through a red haze, which turned black almost at the instant. I was blind, and fought blindly. I seemed to lose all knowledge, all consciousness, under the merciless throttling of those hard fingers. Then suddenly they relaxed—I caught a quick, reviving breath, another. Every nerve in me throbbed; I could see again, hear, feel.

That was Noreen's face I looked into — ay, and the girl was actually dragging the fellow off me! I took another breath, a long one, moving so that the inert body rolled over on its side; then I rose up, supporting myself on one arm, and stared about, sobbing in the first effort to regain control. What had happened? how had I been saved? I was too much confused to think, or reason. I had been within an ace of death, and realized some miracle alone had saved me. I trembled so with weakness that I sank helplessly back to the floor, my eyes closing. Then her hands touched me; I felt my head lifted into her lap, her fingers stroked my face, and pressed back my hair. Again I forced my eyes open, and looked at her.

“Noreen!” the name choked in my throat, yet must have been uttered.

“Yes; it is all right now — Cowan is dead.”

“Dead! You — you killed him?”

“No; it must have been your shot. I had no chance; you — you two fought like mad men — then — then he just let go of you, and fell back. I was afraid to come — I thought at first he had killed you.”

“My shot! why the revolver just went off,” I muttered, scarcely comprehending. “See! the bullet burned me across the chest, and there is blood there.

And you say it struck him? Lord! I never knew. Help me to sit up, Noreen."

With the aid of her arms I found support against the table, my senses coming back with change of posture, the air inhaled by my lungs bringing a corresponding strength. I could speak without pain, and my breathing grew more natural. The blue coat I wore showed clearly the mark of the bullet, and blood discolored the burned cloth. I ran my hand within, touching the flesh.

"A mere scratch," I said lightly, "requiring a little water. Don't cry, Noreen; there is no harm done; I'll be all right in a minute. Are you sure Cowan is dead?"

"Yes; he — he hasn't moved since; but — but I didn't kill him."

"Of course not, and I'm glad I did. That is part of my trade, and I'll not lose any sleep over it. Ah! I can get up alone, and the first thing I am going to do is to bar that door."

CHAPTER XXV

WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER.



MAY have staggered as I crossed the room, but I accomplished the feat unaided, each movement giving me renewed strength. The wooden bar fitted tightly into its grooves, and, once firmly in place, left us secure from any unexpected intrusion. My brain cleared, and my gaze wandered about the bare, squalid apartment, as I swiftly reviewed our dangerous position. Noreen had drawn away from the body of the dead man, and stood against the further log wall, with face hidden in her hands. Cowan lay at full length, one arm thrown across his eyes. It was hard for me to conceive that the man was actually dead, and I bent over him, touching his flesh with my fingers to assure myself. The ball had penetrated his abdomen, and how the fellow ever fought so fiercely after receiving that death wound I can never understand. I think that in his mad ferocity he was scarcely aware that he was hurt — his one overmastering desire being to kill me. I turned him partly over, and drew out from the inside pocket of his blouse a handful of papers concealed

there. One was a buff packet, which had been roughly torn open, but which bore no inscription; the others ordinary appearing letters addressed to Cowan. The latter I barely glanced at, assuring myself they contained nothing of special interest, but examined the contents of the buff packet with care, convinced that this was the one taken from Major Harwood the night of his murder.

The packet contained several official papers, emanating from General Ramsay's headquarters. Two of these related to army operations in western Virginia, and the present distribution of troops, requesting the dispatch of another regiment of infantry to help free the country from guerrillas. There was also a personal letter from Ramsay to McClellan giving more intimate details, and a general review of the situation, but the principal paper was a carefully prepared list of irregulars operating throughout the mountain country, with names of the better known leaders, the estimated strength of each separate gang, the region in which they hid, and the side they espoused, if any. This had evidently been carefully prepared by some staff-officer, undoubtedly Major Harwood himself, as the letter referred to him as having been detailed to such duty, and was full and complete. I found therein this mention of the Cowans: "Father and two sons; probably

control fifty or more men, with headquarters near Union in Green Briar Mountains; raid indiscriminately; have attacked our forage trains; refuse to cooperate, and continue to terrorize a large section; raided Lewisburg before it was occupied by troops, killing several, and looting the shops. Is considered the most dangerous gang operating in Green Briar and Monroe Counties; reports of atrocities received almost daily, many too hideous to repeat."

I glanced up at Noreen, and her eyes met mine inquiringly.

"Is this your father's handwriting?" I asked, holding the paper toward her.

"Yes; what is it? important?"

"Not very complimentary to Cowan here. A report to General Halleck, at Washington, of conditions in Western Virginia. I wonder how the old villain ever learned that such a paper was being forwarded?"

"It is not likely he did," she answered thoughtfully. "It may have been mere accident which put the document in his hands. See, here is a letter that father wrote," and she stooped and picked it up from the floor, uttering an exclamation of surprise. "Why, it — it is addressed to Ned Cowan at Union! What could he have possibly written this man about?"

“Let me see,” and I took it from her hands. “We may find here an explanation of the whole affair.”

It was a single sheet, very formal in expression, as though the writer merely performed a duty which he considered unpleasant, but necessary. He acknowledged receipt of a communication reaching him at Ramsay’s headquarters, apparently an application for pardon, and a pledge to unite with the Federal forces, and stated that the writer would be at the Minor house near Hot Springs at a certain date, where he would be glad to confer further regarding the matter. He agreed to come unattended, and suggested that his visitor use the name of Taylor so as to prevent any suspicion. The closing paragraph referred to a former misunderstanding between them, and expressed a kindly desire to blot out all memory of what had occurred. My hands trembled as I read the lines, and the girl at my side cried softly, her eyes so filled with tears I doubt if she could distinguish the words. Scarcely aware of the action I held her with my arm, the letter crumpled between my fingers.

“It is all clear enough now, little girl,” I whispered, my voice trembling from sympathy. “Your father met his death at the hands of a treacherous scoundrel. It was a plot carefully conceived, and now Cowan has paid the penalty. I am glad we have

learned the truth; but Major Harwood would never wish you to mourn here in the midst of all this danger — you are listening?”

“Yes; I will do just as you say; but — but I cannot remain here in presence of this man’s body. It — it will drive me insane.”

“It will be best to go; safer, I think also, for Anse and his gang may return here. There would be no mercy shown us in such a case. Sit here a moment,” and I forced her upon a stool with her back to the dead man, “while I search for food. I can trust you alone?”

Her hands clung to me, but she was no longer crying, although unshed tears dimmed her eyes.

“I — I thank God,” she faltered, “that he sent you to me. I could not bear all this alone.”

“I am glad you care to have me here,” I answered eagerly. “I was half afraid you did not.”

“Oh, but I do; I cannot tell you all it means. I — I think I have never felt more helpless, or — or discouraged.”

“It is the strain of so much occurring at once, and you are worn out. We will get away from here, somewhere back into the hills where we can feel safe from discovery. Then we can rest all day, and you will be all right again. We need sleep and food.”

I released her hands gently, and began a swift search of the cabin. It did not require long to explore the single room, and I found all we required in a big box beside the bunk. What I could conveniently transport was pressed into a clean bag, and I also took possession of a quilt to add to her comfort. I left Cowan lying just as he had fallen, seeing little use in attempting to conceal the body. Both of us were glad enough when we closed the door of the shack, and returned to our horses. We rode on steadily for an hour, only occasionally exchanging a word. The road was rough and mountainous, so rocky underfoot our horses left no trail. At last we came to a narrow ravine down which a brook plunged over a stony bed. There was no trail visible, but it was possible to advance some distance by keeping close to the bank. I dismounted, and, holding to the rein, led my horse carefully forward.

“Follow as closely as you can,” I called back to her, “and keep at the rock edge so as to leave no trail.”

For a hundred yards, or more, we experienced no difficulty, the stream turning to the right, and following the same direction as the pike we had deserted. The forest growth between, however, left the latter invisible. Then the stream veered

suddenly to another point of compass, and the trees so obstructed the bank that I led the way down into the water. It must have been a mile above this point — a mile of hard, slow travel, the water to my knees, and the rocks below treacherous — when I ventured to climb the bank, and seek a suitable spot for our day camp. A safer place surely could not have been found. We were in a narrow defile, scarcely fifty feet across, and guarded on either side by high rock walls, precipitous, and exhibiting no sign of a trail. The woods were open, yet sufficiently thick to yield good cover from observation from above, and there was sufficient grass for the horses. I picketed these close to the stream, and spread blankets for the lady to lie on at the foot of the bluff, where she would be well screened by a thicket of underbrush. Then I came back to where she sat silently against the bole of a large tree, watching my movements.

“No doubt we are safe enough here,” I said, opening the pack. “But I’ll not risk a fire; you can eat, I suppose?”

“I hardly know,” wearily. “Perhaps I can choke a little food down; but really I am not hungry. How far have we come?”

“As a mere guess I should say nearly ten miles since leaving the cabin. By the sun it must be nine

o'clock. Eat what you can, and then lie down on the blankets and rest. We will not leave here until just before dark."

"And you?"

"Oh, I may doze later if there is no alarm; I shall never be far away."

She ate of the coarse food daintily, apparently without appetite, but I did full justice to the meal, satisfied, for the time being at least, that we were securely hidden. The horses munched at the sweet grass behind us, and a ray of sunshine found way through the leaves overhead, and lay in bar of gold across her hair. In spite of her long vigil the girl's face bore few marks of fatigue, and her eyes, occasionally lifted to meet mine, were not heavy with sleep. I endeavored to talk, to speak lightly on inconsequential topics, but her brief responses were not encouraging. There was a strange constraint between us, and, finally, hoping to make her feel more at ease, I ventured to broach the subject which I knew must be also uppermost in her mind.

"It is an odd situation in which we find ourselves," I began awkwardly, my eyes on the ground, "but I hope you — you will not feel embarrassed, or — or fail to have complete confidence in me. I — I have no wish to take any advantage; or — or assume any authority."

I stopped, unable to express the thing I desired to say, and the silence seemed long. I lifted my eyes, and she was looking at me.

"May I ask you one question?"

"A dozen."

"No, the one is all. You really believed those who attacked us were Cowan's men?"

"I had no other thought, Miss Noreen."

"Then your proposal was merely made in the hope of thus protecting me from insult?"

"That was my sole thought at the time," I replied soberly. "It was a desperate chance, yet the only one apparently left us. That is what I wanted to say, to explain," I went on hastily, before she could interrupt. "I realize the serious mistake made, and how embarrassing it must all be to you. But you must believe me a gentleman. I would never have spoken one word; never have made any claim upon you. Miss Noreen, I realize that I have no right."

"You may call me Noreen," she said simply. "We have been friends, and I think we will always be. I do trust you, and believe in you; only I wanted to understand fully your motive. I do not blame you, nor myself; we did what seemed best at the time, and — and now we must meet the issue as we best can. Perhaps I should not have said

what I did back there in Lewisburg. I had no time in which to consider, and my only thought then was to justify my action in aiding your escape. My — my being your — your wife was the only excuse I could urge for such disloyalty. Surely you — you comprehended my purpose? ”

“ And appreciated the sacrifice. ”

“ It — it was hardly that; no more than a swift impulse. I — I did not even grasp all that it might imply. I knew I must aid you; that I could do no less; but — but I did not realize then that such a choice meant that I must flee with you — put myself in your protection. I — I intended to stay there — there in Lewisburg, and rely upon my friends to save me from punishment. ” She leaned across toward me, speaking rapidly. “ I knew General Ramsay, and felt he would accept my word — the word of Major Harwood’s daughter — and be just. But — but after we were free; after that soldier was left dead, I — I seemed to grasp the seriousness of my position, and — and became afraid. I — I wanted so to get away, I hardly knew my own mind. That was why I insisted on riding with you. ”

“ And now you are sorry? ”

“ I — do not know, ” hesitatingly. “ I cannot decide. Where do you take me? ”

“Noreen,” I said soberly, struggling to keep my hand from touching her own, where it rested on the grass, “it is too late now to go back; to think of going back. We cannot deny, or conceal, our marriage, since you have openly acknowledged it, and we have gone away together. There is only one straight path left for us now — across the mountains to old Virginia.”

“I — I know — and then?”

“You must trust my honor, my discretion. We are friends, you say, and I mean to prove worthy. My orders will take me to Richmond; have you either friends, or relatives, there?”

“I am not sure, the war has made such changes — but I hardly think any in whom I could confide.”

“Then we will find a way for you to join my mother; she is in North Carolina, out of the track of armies. You will consent to go to her?”

“If you think it best. I — I have never met your mother; perhaps —”

“You will be just as welcome; I will write her every detail, and she will be rejoiced to shelter you. The only trouble is the necessary delay involved by the war; the impossibility of your venturing to return to Green Briar until the conflict is over.”

She was silent a long while, her eyes cast down,

her breathing noticeably rapid. I waited, not knowing what else to add, and was about to propose her lying down, when she spoke suddenly:

“You mean our — our separation?”

“Certainly. That can be easily arranged as soon as the courts are again in session. Possibly the ceremony was not even legal without witnesses, but, under the circumstances, it had better be dissolved in court. Such action would remove all doubt from your mind.”

“Yes — I suppose so; you — you make it very clear. And that would have to be done in Green Briar? — the — the action for divorce?”

“At Lewisburg; not necessarily, of course, but I supposed you would rather have the facts made known there, so that your friends can realize all the conditions — the cause, I mean. Possibly you may not need to do this.”

“Not need! Why?”

“A soldier never knows what another minute means; I am a soldier.”

“Oh! you should not say that!”

“It is part of the trade; I had no thought of hurting you, yet the bullet to set you free may be even now in a Federal cartridge box.”

She did not look at me, or move, although I thought the hand resting on the grass trembled.

“I believe I will lie down,” she said finally. “Is that the place you have chosen, beyond those trees?”

“Yes; let me help you up; the blankets are both yours. I shall not need any.”

I stood and watched her move across through the mingled shade and sun, until her slender form finally disappeared behind the screen of undergrowth. Once she had glanced about, pausing as though some thought had occurred suddenly, but did not speak. I was left alone.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CANE RIDGE MEETING HOUSE



THE spot where Noreen lay was not fifty feet distant, but my position gave me no glimpse of her through the tangled brush. Yet the woods were clearer on either side of the little thicket in which she was sheltered, so that nothing could approach from any direction, and escape my notice. I had no wish to sleep, although physically wearied and bruised almost from head to foot. There was no rest to my brain; no driving away of the thoughts engendered by this interview. Whatever of hope I had formerly clung to had been banished utterly by this last fragment of conversation. I had been frank, and pictured before her the entire situation; had outlined the only sure way of escape — and she had silently acquiesced. She had spoken no word of protest, expressed no faint desire to have it otherwise. She had even confessed that her accompanying me in flight arose from sudden impulse; that she had been driven onward by fear of what might befall her if she remained behind. The girl cared nothing for me beyond a mere colorless friendship,

her sole ambition now was a desire to reach the protection of others, and then dissolve the slight, formal bonds which bound us. The position she assumed left me small choice; I must crush within me the love I felt; for the slightest conception of its existence would add to her embarrassment, and render more unpleasant our necessary companionship. I felt confident she had no suspicion; I had guarded well my words, and my actions. She had no cause to question my motives, nor to suppose that I was actuated by any personal desire. Her answers to my proposition proved that, for she had voiced no protest, given vent to no expression which I could construe favorably. No; our future relationship was already fixed, decided — it was to be that of simple friendship.

I sat there a long while motionless, my back pressed against a tree, thinking, and endeavoring to plan the future. Nothing disturbed the silence, except the movements of the two horses as they grazed, and the impudent chatter of a squirrel overhead. The sky above was cloudless, and the sunlight fell warm through the tree branches. The pike road was too far away for any noise of passing travelers to reach my ears, although once I imagined I heard the report of a distant rifle. I must have dozed, for the sun was high overhead when I finally aroused

myself, and arose to my feet. I watered the animals, and then seated myself again, this time on a flat stone beside the stream. My position afforded me a clear view of the bluff opposite, and, as I idly studied its rocky outline, it somehow assumed a familiar appearance — awoke unconsciously a dormant memory. Surely I had never been here before, even in the days of my boyhood's vagrant tramping, and yet that terraced crest, with the huge rock chimney rising conspicuous at its center, revived a recollection that would not be entirely denied. I had seen it before, but from another angle — from the south; from that hillside, perhaps, where the creek headed. Why, yes; there was a spring gushing out of the rocks, and the opening of a shallow cave back of it. I was there with my father, and Jake Mocroft, the sheriff. They were hunting deer, and I had begged so to be taken along that they finally let me come. And Jake shot a deer just above the spring, and we camped there at the cave entrance; why that was fifteen years ago, and I was only nine; and the men were both dead. But I remembered — it all came back again clear and distinct — the rough trail from the spring, winding and twisting along the face of the steep hill until it finally attained the crest, and skirted that odd chimney rock, and then down to where a church stood alongside the pike, a big log

church, with hitching racks each side. Why that was Cane Ridge Baptist — Nichol's church!

I do not know why I laughed, but I did — perhaps it was from sudden relief at thus discovering exactly where we were, and seeing clearly the easier way out. The sound of a foot stepping on a round stone caused me to face about. Noreen was within a few feet of me, higher up on the bank, one hand holding back the bough of a tree.

"Why were you laughing?" she asked. "I thought you had gone until I heard that sound."

"Deserted you! never! I am not that kind of a cavalier. Why, I protest I watched over you faithfully for hours while you slept, never even venturing to move from the spot where you left me. I swear it!"

"And I believe; but surely this is not the spot."

"No; the sun was high, and I ventured to water the horses; then I lingered, studying the ridge over yonder. Do you recognize it?"

She gazed where I pointed, shading her eyes from the sun, her forehead drawn into puckers. At last she shook her head, her glance seeking my face inquiringly.

"It awakens no memory."

"Because of the point of view. If you were at the top you would remember. I studied it a long

while before I recognized the place myself. I had to laugh when the truth finally came to me; that is Cane Ridge."

"Where — where the Baptist church is?"

"Exactly; where Parson Nichols points out to his congregation the straight and narrow way. There is a bridle-path yonder leading up from the valley, which will save us a five mile detour. But it means we are still in Cowan's country, and to climb there with horses will require the use of daylight."

"You think Anse —"

"Is probably back before this, and doing his best to trail us. Even if he does not discover the body of old Ned, he will naturally conclude we will head east. My only hope is that not having seen us last night he may imagine we chose the southern route, and ride there first. But if he did, doubtless he would send some of his men scouting this way."

"You have heard — seen nothing?"

"No, we are too far back; the noise of an army passing along the pike would not reach here. If we get to Cane Ridge Church before dark, we must trust to luck, and the night for the next thirty miles."

"You fear Cowan's gang more than the troops? Surely they will pursue?"

"No doubt; Pickney will be raving, and Raymond crazy to get hand on me. Ay! there will be some galloping of troopers. I should have liked to see Fox's face when he heard the news; by heavens! they are like enough to charge him with conspiracy, for he was officer of the day. However I do not greatly fear them; they will make noise enough to warn us, and couldn't track a bear. It is the mountain men we must guard against; they are wolves. You slept well?"

"After the first half hour. I am rested, and strong. Shall we go now?"

"When we have eaten. There may be no other opportunity, and there is ample time. You might even sleep another hour."

"Oh, no, I could not," and she gave a gesture significant. "It was only complete exhaustion that gave me sleep before. I would rather feel we were making way through the cordon of our enemies."

"I am glad you say 'our.'"

"I can scarcely do otherwise, sir," she said, just a bit archly, "for does not this cloak make me a 'gray-back?'"

"You wear the colors; ay! with not a tinge of blue about you."

"You forget the eyes; all my loyalty is centered there."

"I have not forgotten them, and never shall," I contended stoutly, "but I have met blue-eyed Rebels. Besides loyalty is not all upon one side; I even lay claim to that virtue."

"Nor would I deny it to either Federal or Confederate. I am not a fanatic, Tom Wyatt, even although my father chose the blue. But my true loyalty just now is to my — my husband." She laughed, moving backward as I impulsively extended my hands. "Do not take this statement too seriously, please. We must play out the play, and I accept my destiny. Shall we go now? Really I am actually hungry."

We sat over the poor meal a long while talking largely about our childhood days, and bringing back to mind earlier acquaintances. She told me of her home life, the death of her mother, and her experiences while away at school, and, largely in answer to questions, I recounted some of my army hardships, and what little I knew of the battles in which I had borne part. But the one topic of importance, although it must have lingered constantly in both our minds, was carefully avoided. Again and again I endeavored to draw her thought that way, only to be adroitly diverted into safer channels. It became, at last, so evident she preferred that all this be ignored, that I finally desisted, and joined with her

in light reminiscences. So we sat in the sunlight, talking like old friends, laughing over revived memories, almost forgetting that we were fugitives, our very lives at stake. Twice we heard guns, but the reports were but distant echoes, sounding afar off to the westward. Yet these made me nervous to get away, and when a number sounded together — almost a volley, distinctly audible, I hastened to pack what little remained of food on our horses, and prepare for immediate departure. I led the way, fording the shallow stream, and guiding my horse up the opposite bank into the deep shadow of the woods beyond. Here we skirted the edge of the steep hill, finding difficult passage over rocks, and amid tangled underbrush, seeking the trail whose exact location I could but dimly recall; yet the very lay of the land was a guide, and my eyes, anxiously searching the sharp ascent ahead, finally discerned the dark mouth of the cave, the discovery of which led to our turning sharply to the left.

Noreen dismounted also, and thus we succeeded in inducing the two horses to clamber upward — slipping and sliding on the steep acclivity — until we safely attained the remnant of bridle path, scarcely discernible because of lusty weeds. To all appearance it had been unused for years, and in places entirely obliterated by rains. Yet it was plainly

traceable, although neither of us dared to mount, and trust to the uncertain footing of the horses. However, bad as it was, it was now too late to retrace our steps, and we pressed grimly forward, holding firm to the bridle reins, and moving with the utmost caution. As we mounted higher, twisting and turning among the scrub, the valley we had left lay dark and mysterious below, the sun ever sinking lower behind the opposite ridge, until its final rays fairly bridged the chasm. It had disappeared entirely by the time we breathlessly attained the top, yet the western sky was red, the remaining light amply sufficient to enable us to perceive our surroundings. Indeed, it would be an hour, perhaps more, before night enshrouded this high ridge.

We halted beside the chimney rock to regain breath after the toilsome climb, and assure ourselves that the way beyond was clear. Noreen seated herself on the ground, and the horses began to graze, but I walked forward to where I could gain better view. The summit of the hill was open, except for a considerable grove to the rear of the church. That edifice appeared, as I remembered it, unchanged in any respect — a fairly large building, constructed solidly of logs, with square clapboarded tower in front, four windows on each side, containing small panes of glass, a number of them broken. We were

at the rear, which showed a larger window, and a narrow door at one corner, protected by a porch. It appeared desolate and deserted, the loneliness accentuated by the empty hitching racks on either side. Beyond I caught glimpse of the white ribbon of road, running straight across the level, and dipping down into the depression beyond. There was no movement, no sign of life, anywhere visible — just that desolate, deserted church, standing in rough outline amid the red mist of evening. I stood silent, gazing in every direction, until assured that we were alone on the ridge. Then I retraced my steps to where she waited.

“The way is clear,” I said, in answer to her uplifted eyes. “But it will hardly be safe to take the road for some hours yet. Shall we remain here?”

“If you think it safe I would prefer to walk forward to the church; it might be open.”

“Oh, I imagine it will be safe enough, and we can leave the horses here out of sight. But are you not tired?”

“No,” rising to her feet, “you forget I am a mountain girl. I was breathless from tugging at the horse; but I am all right now. They say you can see the road for miles from the church tower.”

“Then we will take a peep, if we can break in before daylight ends; I had not thought of that.”

We advanced side by side along what was once a well-trodden path, making no attempt at concealment. Indeed, any such effort would have been useless, as the crest of the ridge lay open, and bare of vegetation, but I was so fully convinced we were unobserved that I took no precaution — my entire thought, indeed, centered upon the girl at my side. The small door at the rear of the church resisted our efforts at opening, and we advanced to the front entrance, passing between the walls of the church and the row of hitching posts. All remained silent, the purple haze of twilight beginning to show along the distant ridges. The heavy latch of the front door lifted easily to the pressure of my hand, and we stepped into a narrow vestibule, Noreen grasping my arm nervously, as she faced the shadowed interior of the deserted building. Some instinct of caution caused me to close the door behind us, and then I drew her forward, laughing at her fears, until we obtained glimpse of the larger room, already becoming obscured by the approaching night. It was a rather shabby looking place, not overly clean even in that merciful dimness, a huge stove, rusty red, occupying the space between the two doors, the stove-pipe extending to the opposite wall. Rude benches, without backs, stretched almost from wall to wall, a narrow aisle leading to the pulpit, set within an

alcove, and scarcely discernible except in barest outlines. Everything was lonely and depressing, the silence unbroken. A clock, run down, stared at me from the further end, and I recognized a big Bible, lying open on the gaunt pulpit stand. A book of some kind, dog's-eared and coverless, lay on the floor at my feet, and I bent to pick it up. As I came upright again, a man stepped out from the shadow of a corner, and the steel barrel of a revolver flashed before my eyes. I felt Noreen cringe against me, uttering a muffled cry.

"Stand as yer are, Yank," said a rather pleasant voice. "Pardon me, lady."

CHAPTER XXVII

WITH BACKS TO THE WALL



HE WAS a young fellow, with bold black eyes, a little jaunty mustache, and a mouth inclined to laugh, but what I stared at in open-eyed astonishment, was his broad-brimmed hat, and natty gray cavalry jacket.

“Some surprise party, I reckon,” he chuckled grimly. “What was this, a church wedding, dear boy? Here, Wharton, kindly relieve the gentleman of his arsenal; ah! some assortment, I see. Your pardon, Madam, but occasionally even the fair sex travel armed these days, and I should hate to be harsh. Thank you, very much; Wharton take the lady’s gun also. It’s all right, boys.”

To my unbounded amazement up from the floor, where they had been lying concealed beneath the benches a considerable number of men came scrambling to their feet. I could not count them in the dim light, but those nearest me were gray clad — troopers, from their short jackets — with carbines in their hands. Wharton, our revolvers safe in his grasp, grinned and stepped behind his officer.

"Who, in heavens name, are you?" I asked, at last finding my voice. "Confederates here?"

"Your first guess is an excellent one," he answered lightly, evidently enjoying the scene. "It evidences a well disciplined mind, and marvelous power of observation. Yes, my Yankee friend, you now behold Confederates, Johnny Rebs, the enemy; you have the honor of being prisoner to the Third Kentucky Cavalry. Wharton."

"Yes, sir."

"Conduct the lady and gentleman to the sanctity of the pulpit, Sergeant, where they may commune with the presiding genius of this house of worship erected in the wilderness. Imagine not," he continued with a wave of the hand, "that the blackened optic which adorns the ministerial countenance was a gift of the Confederacy. Far be it from us," bowing humbly to the astonished Noreen, "to war against either ladies, or the church; beauty and goodness are ever safe in our hands, and I assure you both that the reverend gentleman was delivered into our care in his present condition of disfigurement."

"You mean you hold prisoner Parson Nichols?" I asked, scarcely grasping the sense of his rambling speech.

"No doubt 'tis he, although I have no recollection that he has confided his name to our ears. We

discovered the party alone in this edifice of worship, nursing sundry bruises and abrasions, and feeling that probably he was of the Church Militant, held him for the pleasure of his company. Stone, Michels, return to the front; now, Sergeant, you may take the prisoners."

"Just a moment, Lieutenant," and I faced him squarely, ignoring the grip of Wharton's hand on my arm. "There is no reason to hold us prisoners; all there is Yankee about me is this uniform. I have just escaped from the Federal guard at Lewisburg."

His eyes laughing, yet suspicious, swept our faces.

"I'm not easily fooled," he said, "but ready enough to learn. Who are you?"

"Thomas Wyatt, Sergeant, Staunton Horse Artillery."

"Who is your captain?"

"Philip Lavigne."

"Good; and your first lieutenant?"

"George E. Whitehouse."

"Ah! you know the battery, all right. When were you with them last?"

"Ten days ago, in camp at Front Royal."

"By all the gods, it soundeth strange but true. Come, clear up the mystery — how came you here?"

"On Jackson's orders. I was born in this county, and because of that he chose me to find out the

numbers, and disposition of the Federal troops in this neighborhood, together with some other facts he wished to know. I was captured in Federal uniform, and held under death sentence as a spy. I escaped last night."

"And the woman?"

She threw back the cape which had partially concealed her face, revealing her bright eyes and flushed cheeks.

"Permit me to answer for myself, Lieutenant Harwood."

"You! how do you know my name?"

"From your regiment, sir, as well as certain characteristics of speech I have heard described. I am your cousin."

"My — my cousin? Heaven be praised! I never knew there was so much beauty in our family. My cousin! Hold, till I guess a bit — not Noreen Harwood?"

She nodded, her red lips smiling.

"Noreen Harwood! Why, it takes me off my feet. Yet wait, how comes it you are here with one claiming to be on our side? Did I not hear that my uncle served on Ramsay's staff — ay! a major?"

"My father is dead," she answered simply, the brightness vanishing from her face. "He was killed only a few days ago."

"I regret to learn that, cousin," and he held out his hand, "for while I never met him or you before, my father held him in most high regard. Yet I beg you pardon me if I perform my duty as a soldier, even under these conditions. We are a small band, in the heart of the enemy's country, and cannot afford any unnecessary risk. Who is this man? and why are you here with him?"

"He has told you the truth," she answered quietly, her hand still within his. "I have known him from childhood."

"He is a Confederate soldier, then?"

"Yes."

"And you, cousin?"

"I — I am his wife."

There was a moment of silence, of hesitation. I heard the soldiers moving about the room, and the murmur of voices speaking cautiously. Then Harwood released her hand, and extended his own to me, his eyes frank and cordial.

"I accept you on faith, comrade," he said pleasantly, "but there is a spare gray jacket strapped to my saddle yonder more becoming than that blue coat. Here, Stone," with a glance over his shoulder, and a crispness to his voice, "get the extra blouse from off my horse, and bring it here; run low, lad, and keep in the shadow. Saint Christopher! but 'tis

a most happy family reunion we're having; I'll want the story presently, but now I must look to my men. 'Tis no easy game we are playing."

"Let me understand that, Lieutenant," I exclaimed, as he turned away. "How does it happen you are here? and for what purpose?"

"A wild plan of my own, aided and abetted by the commander at Covington. We are of the garrison there," he explained briefly, his glance searching out the dim interior. "The Yankees have a forage train out as far as Hot Springs, under small guard. 'Tis the farthest east they have ever ventured, and our scouts brought the news. To this mind came the brilliant thought of cutting them off on their return march, and I got permission for the dash. We took the cut-off, and landed here about daylight. The train should have been along before now, but there is no sign of it."

"You have been in hiding here all day, and seen nothing?"

"Oh! we've seen enough," and he laughed. "But nothing we cared to measure swords with. The road yonder appears popular, but, by good luck, no Yankee shows an eagerness to attend church. There was a gang of mountain men along by here maybe two hours ago who rode up to the door, and took a look at the shebang. Whether they were Yank or

Reb I didn't know. Anyhow we were willing enough to see them pass on out o' sight. They looked and talked as though they were spoiling for a fight."

"How many?"

"Thirty, or forty — a right smart crowd. There was only two come up, and rode round the church — a big fellow with a red beard, and a little weasened-faced fox he called Kelly."

"Yes, I know them; they were hunting after us. Did they go on east?"

"They did. So has everyone else we've seen to-day. That's what puzzled us, as to just what might be up. I reckon you must be some popular to create such a furore. Why, an hour after sun-up a whole blame company of blue-coats went by, riding like mad, their horses dripping, and a young fellow spurring them on. He'd lost his hat, and they never so much as took a side-look at this shebang. They were in some hurry, my friend."

"And neither party has returned?"

"Not a sign of them."

"What force have you here?"

"Twenty-eight enlisted men."

"You have pickets out?"

"One man each way, a mile down the road, concealed. The tower up there commands the country in both directions."

“And your horses?”

“Hidden in the grove yonder.”

I grasped the situation clearly enough, and also comprehended the reckless nonchalance of the officer. What was his purpose? his present plan? It appeared to me that the conditions warranted a retreat, back along the unfrequented mountain trail by which this daring party of adventurers had come. The troops, as well as the guerrillas, must have discovered by this time that we were not in advance of them. They would return searching every nook and corner in hope of discovering our hiding place. They might even unite their forces, impelled as they were by the same desire, and thus become truly formidable. Personal hatred of me, and the wish to regain possession of Noreen, would animate and control both Anse Cowan and the angry, humiliated lieutenant. While neither would likely confess his purpose to the other, yet their mutual interests would naturally suggest an alliance. And there was no war feud between the two which would necessarily prevent their cooperation. Indeed, the troopers would gladly welcome any excuse which would bring Cowan's gang of outlaws into closer connection. And the outfit would never pass by this church again without searching its interior. Only eagerness, a haste to overtake us in our attempted flight, had led

to their blind riding by before. I turned to Harwood, who was whispering nonsense to Noreen.

"What do you mean to do, Lieutenant?" I asked quietly, but with my own mind made up. "Remain here?"

He stroked his small moustache.

"I thought we might hang on until midnight, Wyatt, and then, if nothing happened, take the back trail. I don't want to pass another day in this cursed hole. What do you think?"

"That the sooner we get away the better," I answered promptly. "Your position here is far more dangerous than you appear to realize. Both those parties travelling east were in search after us; they were led by men who would go to any extreme to effect our capture. I haven't time to tell you the whole story now, but it involves your cousin as well as myself. They rode straight on because they were convinced we were still ahead of them. 'Tis likely they know better now, and will search every ravine and covert on their return. If the forage train is moving this way those cavalrymen are with it in addition to the regular guard, and you will never dare attack with your small force. The only chance you have of bringing your command safely back to Covington, Lieutenant, is to get away before your presence here is suspected."

"I suppose that's right," he admitted reluctantly. "But I don't like to turn tail without hitting a blow — it's not the style of the Third Kentucky. We could give a good account of ourselves against those Yankee troopers."

"Possibly; but not against a combination of troopers, wagon guard, and Cowan's gang of guerillas. They would outnumber you four to one; and they are fighting men."

"You think they will combine?"

"If they meet, and there is an explanation — yes. Cowan doesn't care which side he fights on, so he gains his end, and the cavalry commander will welcome any reinforcements. They might quarrel later over results, but now they possess a common object, and will be like two peas in a pod. Do as you please, Harwood, but I am not under your command, and, if you choose to remain here, we will ride on alone. Will you go with me, Noreen?"

She had not spoken, and in the fast increasing gloom I could scarcely distinguish her presence. But at my direct question she took a step toward me, and I felt the presence of her hand on my sleeve.

"Yes," she said simply, "whenever you think best. Cousin," she added, glancing across her shoulder at the perplexed officer, "I would like you to come too."

He laughed, wheeling about in sudden decision.

"I reckon I might as well," he admitted good humoredly, "as long as the family endorses the move. Wharton, have the pickets drawn in, and the men mustered. "We'll start — Great God! What is that?"

It was the sound of a scattered volley, the pieces not all of the same caliber, the reports ringing clear. In the instant of silence which followed, a voice called down excitedly from the tower:

"There is firing to the east, sir."

"How far away, Somers?" It was the sergeant who spoke.

"'Bout a quarter of a mile, I reckon; the flash showed up a bunch o' men this side o' the big rock. They must o' got sight o' Hardy, sir, an' popped away at him; thet's 'bout whar he was."

Harwood swore, but his sudden oath was not altogether uncheerful, as he strode across to the nearest window on that side, and endeavored to peer out. Except for a faint tinge of light in the west, and a half moon in the southern sky, we were enveloped in darkness. I could scarcely distinguish the girl at my side, although the windows emitted a slight glimmer, and the form of the lieutenant outlined against the opening was dimly visible. I doubt if he perceived anything, but we all of us heard the sound of hoofs,

and the approaching rumble of wagon wheels. Harwood turned, and faced inward.

"It's the forage train, boys," he said sharply, "with a bunch of cavalry riding ahead. Get to the windows, but be quiet about it — you know the orders. By God! Wharton, we're liable to have our fight yet. Have the men load; come with me, Wyatt, where we can see out in front."

Noreen clung to me, as I groped my way through the narrow door into the vestibule. It could make little difference where she was in case we were discovered and attacked; better, indeed, that we remain together. At the open window I held her hands, and the three of us watched in silence, staring out at the white ribbon of road revealed under the moon, the noise of the approaching column growing more distinct.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE TRAP CLOSES



HE lieutenant's fingers gripped my shoulder.

"By the Lord Harry, the fellows make noise enough for an army," he whispered. "I reckon they are all there."

"No doubt of it — how is your ammunition?"

"Sixty rounds to a man," he chuckled. "It will cost them something to get through these log walls. Still, we haven't much chance in the end," he added thoughtfully, "for they're bound to get us. Generally I pray for a fight, but now I hope those Yanks will be kind enough to ride by."

"And so do I," I answered soberly, feeling the quick pressure of Noreen's fingers. "There they come, Harwood — see! two horsemen ahead."

They were merely black shadows outlined against the white road, but as they drew somewhat closer the moonlight gave them substance, revealing dimly the shape and clothing of each. One was slender, sitting straight in the saddle, to all appearance a cavalryman; but the other slouched awkwardly over his pommel, a larger, more shapeless figure, the bar-

rel of a rifle showing clear above his shoulder, a broad hat-brim flapping to the movements of his horse. They drew rein opposite the church, the cavalryman's horse turned partly about. In the distance, down the sharp slope of the hill, appeared the deeper shadow of an advancing column of mounted men. The only sound was the impatient pawing of a horse's hoof, and Noreen's whisper at my ear:

"The — the bigger one is Anse Cowan."

"And the other Raymond," I returned in the same low tone. "The two have apparently got together."

"It looks mighty odd to me," said a voice suddenly, clearly audible through the night, "that fellow being in Reb uniform. What could he be doing here?"

"A scout, I reckon," grumbled a reply, barely distinguishable. "Couldn't be no considerable force along yere, Lieutenant, fer we've both been over ther pike since mornin'. Thet wus just a stray we run into, but it mout be best ter take a look along this yere ridge afore we ride on."

"All right," asserted the other. "I'll wait here until Fox and Moran come up. Let some of your men ride back as far as those woods over yonder; and say, it wouldn't do any harm to take a look inside the church. You didn't stop coming out?"

“Naw; we didn’t stop fer nuthin’. We thought the way you fellers was a’ridin’ yer hed a hot trail, an’ so we rode like hell ter git in at the death. ’Tain’t likely thar’s enyone inside the meetin’ house, but I reckon we may as well be sure as long as we’re here. No damn fool would hide this close ter the pike. That you, Kelly?”

There was a meaningless growl from an advancing group of horsemen, and Anse swore, spurring his horse forward to meet them.

“By God, Kelly! I’ve had enough of your damned grouch. Either you’ll do as I say, or I’ll cave the side of your head in, and have done with it. I’ve had enough! do you hear? I reckon I’m just as interested in overhaulin’ that cuss as you are. Now you obey my orders, an’ be quick about it; give me another line of back talk, you Irish bastard, an’ I’ll blow the whole top of your head off! You’re what? Joking! Well, let up on that kind, will you? I’m in no humor for it. Take three or four men, and ride over the ridge, back as far as the rock. The sojers are goin’ ter halt yere a minute.”

Kelly and his little squad trotted past us, circling the end of the building, the remainder of the group of horsemen, evidently composed of Cowan’s gang of cut-throats, scattering along the roadside, with no semblance to military discipline. A few kept to their

saddles, permitting their horses to browse idly among the weeds, but the majority dismounted, and flung themselves wearily on the ground. A dozen strolled across to the well a few yards away, and we could hear them laugh and joke among themselves, as the windlass creaked. Raymond drew his horse back, away from close contact with the fellows, staring at their antics a moment, and then looking toward the black silence of the church. He said nothing, but finally touched spur to his horse's flanks, and went trotting back down the road, as though intending to intercept the advancing column, which was not yet visible. Cowan looked after him with a sneer.

"The damned dandy," he growled to a man just behind, gesturing with one hand. "We're not quite good enough fer him, but I'll show him afore this job's done who's the boss. By God! I don't take orders from nothin' like that. Would you, Jem?"

"I should say not," responded the other, spitting into the road. "Whatever got us tied up yere with these Yanks, Anse, enyhow? I done thought as how we wus a fightin' against the blue-bellies a bit ago; an' now we're as thick as two fleas. Did yer git yer price?"

Cowan laughed grimly.

"Thar ain't no occasion fer yer ter worry, Jem,"

he confided, evidently willing the others close about should hear. "We ain't tied up with no Yanks, 'cept fer maybe a few hours. Hell! thar wasn't nothin' else ter do, but be friendly. Thar wus thirty o' us runnin' kerbump inter thet bunch o' cavalrymen, with ther wagon train a comin' a hundred yards away.

"We weren't in no shape fer ter fight about a hundred an' fifty sojers. I reckon tho' we'd a had to if that young popinjay hed been in command—he ain't got the sense of a dried louse. But Cap Fox, he rode out, an' we sorter talked it over. He don't feel very blame kind toward me since our fracas tother night, but he's a sojer, an' he knows what Ramsay wants. Thet's what I banked on, fer I knew the gineral had give his orders ter use every means possible ter git us ter help out the Yanks. So I just up an' told ther Cap that we wus out huntin' fer ther same feller he wus; thet my father had been killed, an' I reckoned the Reb spy did it, an' thet frum now on we wus goin' fer ter fight on their side. I don't reckon as how he believed much o' what I sed, but all ther same, he had ter pretend he did, an' let us go 'long without no fightin'. So he done sent us on ahead, an' sent thet young snip along fer ter watch me. Thet's the how it happened."

"I see, an' termorrer we leaves them holdin' the

bag — Hullo, Anse! look thar — it's Kelly comin' back, an', by Jinks! he's a leadin' two hosses."

The returning party came clattering out into the road, past the well, Kelly asking loudly where Cowan was, and then riding straight toward his chief, the two riderless horses trailing in the rear.

"They was hobbled back o' ther chimney rock," he reported shortly, "an' I reckon they'd been rid up the old trail from Silver Spring."

Anse swung down to the ground, and ran his hands over the animals, fingering the equipment.

"Not cavalry stuff," he said, "so tain't likely they belonged ter the Reb we shot back thar in the hollow. Didn't the lieutenant say thet the spy an' the gurl got off on horses hitched by the hotel?"

"I didn't hear tell."

"Well, I did; enyhow they wasn't army horses they took. By God! I believe they're a hidin' now in that church. Here, you Kelly," a new exultant tone to his voice, "scatter your men out around ther whol' buildin'; we've treed our game, I reckon. Hell! hurry up, man! don't sit there starin' at me. Hey, Jem! where are you? Oh, all right; ride back to the sojers, an' tell Fox we've got the coon. Go on now. Wait a minute, Kelly; leave ten of the fellers here with me. I'll look after the front. Don't forget thar's a back door."

The guerrillas came forward on foot, running, and scrambling up the incline, but inclined to keep well back from the silent church. Yet they did not seem to take their mission seriously, laughing and talking as they ran, Kelly's voice growling out commands. Even if their victim was within those log walls, they had little to fear from one man; there might be a shot or two fired, of course, but the odds were far too great for them to entertain any doubt as to the result. Anse remained out in the road motionless, holding his horse, a dark shapeless group of men gathered about him. Jem was clattering down the pike, the clang of his horse's hoofs dying away in the distance. Harwood dropped his gripping hand from off my shoulder, and stepped back from before the window.

"Sergeant."

"Here, sir," and Wharton moved slightly in the darkness, so as to signify his whereabouts.

"You attended to the door?"

"Yes, sir; we found an old iron bar to fit across; they'll have to crush in the wood to get through."

"Good; we'll give those devils a surprise party; there will be some dead men around here presently. I'll take charge here at the front; you have men at the other window?"

"Five, sir."

“Let Johnson and McIlvaine join me here; what is the name of that lad I was going to recommend for corporal?”

“O’Hare, sir; Jacob O’Hare.”

“Put him in command of the south side, and you take the north; place benches to stand on under the windows, but keep your men down until you get the word. There is to be no firing until I give the order. Tell them they have got to fight for their lives. You understand?”

“Yes, sir; we’ll do it, sir.”

“Then get to your stations. Now, Wyatt, how about you? ready to take a hand?”

“I place myself under your orders.”

“Then I give you command at the other end; there are two windows and a door. Here, take this gun, and belt; I can get another.” He stopped, and drew in a quick breath, glancing out again through the window.

“Friend Cowan — if that be his name — seems to be waiting for the military to come up,” he commented mockingly. “Prefers to let the Yanks pull his chestnuts out of the fire. Perhaps he has known you a long while — hey, Wyatt?”

“The acquaintance has been rather brief, but warm.”

“No doubt; well, I’ll help make it warmer pres-

ently. Fair cousin, I do not know where to hide you in safety. This is going to be a real fight, or I am greatly mistaken, and bullets fly wild through the dark."

"I suggest the tower," I interrupted, "with the ladder drawn up; the heavy puncheon floor will be sufficient protection."

"I thought of that expedient," he admitted, "but we will let the lady decide."

"If it is left to me," she said quietly, "I prefer to go with Tom Wyatt."

"But you do not understand," I broke in hastily, my pulses throbbing at her unexpected decision. "They may attack —"

"Oh, yes, the lady does, Wyatt," chuckled the lieutenant, his reckless good nature in no wise lost by the desperation of our position. "She is a Harwood, that's all. Lord! I knew what her choice would be before ever I asked the question. Greetings, fair cousin; now I know we are kin. Hullo! here comes the cavalry! Now, men, to your posts — and stand up to the music."

I caught her hand in mine, still doubtful as to her real purpose. In the reflection of the moonlight I could perceive the outline of her face, and knew her eyes were uplifted frankly to mine.

"You — you mean that, Noreen?"

“Yes; do not refuse. I am not afraid,” she implored. “Take me with you.”

I found the door, and the narrow aisle leading between the two rows of benches. Enough moonlight straggled in through the side windows to enable us to pick our way, and to note the dark, motionless shadows along the side walls where the troopers waited grimly, guns poised and ready. There was a tense breathlessness to the situation which made my heart leap, not a sound audible within but the low whispers as some order passed from man to man down the line. We came to the platform, and felt our way up the steps. It was darker here, yet my eyes, accustomed to the gloom, caught glimpse of crouching figures beyond the pulpit. Outside, sounding some distance away, Kelly’s sharp, penetrating voice shouted an order, accompanied by an oath. One of the kneeling figures rose slowly until his eyes were even with the window sill.

“Men,” I said quietly, barely loud enough to reach their ears. “I am a sergeant in the Staunton Horse Artillery. Your lieutenant has just assigned me to take command at this end of the church. How many are there of you?”

“Ten, sir,” answered the one nearest, after a pause, turning his head slightly. “Three at each window, and four at the door.”

“Door barred?”

“No, locked, and benches piled up against it.”

“You have a prisoner, I understand.”

He gave a muffled sound, as though stifling an incipient laugh.

“Nuthin’ ter worry ’bout; he’s a lyin’ over thar in the corner with Jack Gold a guardin’ of him. I reckon the cuss likes prayin’ better ner fightin’ any day o’ ther week.”

“All right, then; we’ll give Jack Gold something more valuable to attend to.” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “Noreen.”

“Yes.”

“It will give us an extra fightin’ man if you will keep an eye on Nichols, and we’ll need them all. You are willing to help?”

“Of course; I thought I could load guns, but—”

“I would rather have you there,” I interrupted earnestly, “where I can feel reasonably sure you will be safe from stray bullets. I shall be less a coward if I believe you out of danger.”

“A coward — you! Yes, of course, I will go.”

I stepped across the platform, holding her arm.

“This you, Gold?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The lady will watch the prisoner; you better join the others at the door.”

He moved off, evidently glad enough to be relieved, and I stood erect where I could gaze out through the near-by window into the moonlight night without. I had a moment in which to think, to gather my scattered wits together, to face the situation. Behind me the tramp of approaching horsemen sounded along the pike, the gruff tone of an occasional voice, the clang of accoutrements. Then this noise ceased, as the head of the cavalry column came up to where Cowan and his men waited. I could barely make out the murmur of voices in explanation, muffled by the sound of approaching wheels, signifying the slower advance of the guarded wagons. I heard no orders given, yet the moonlight revealed more numerous figures in the thin line stretching across the open space.

“Thar’s sojers out thar now, sir,” whispered the man next the window, fingering his gun nervously, “a slew of ’em. Do yer know how many they got?”

“Only to guess at it: a couple of hundred altogether I should say — enough to make it interesting.”

I leaned forward, attracted by the sight of two figures standing together in the full gleam of the moon — Cowan and Raymond. So they were to command the rear attack, while Fox and the infantryman remained out in front.

"Have you counted the fellows out there?" I asked.

"'Bout fifty near as I kin make out; they're movin' 'round some, an' the light is damned bad."

"Then the main body is still in front, and that is where the fight will likely begin. Pass the word no firing until you get the order."

I stepped back, whispering a word to Noreen as I passed, and took place beside the pulpit, where I could see and hear something of what was about to transpire.

CHAPTER XXIX

WE DRIVE THEM



T WAS silent enough within — not a movement, not a sound. I could perceive dimly the motionless figures clustered about the windows in breathless expectancy, but all was ready, and not even a whispered order was being exchanged. Outside there was scarcely any more noise audible — the occasional pawing of a horse, a distant thud of feet where some infantrymen were being hurried into position, and now and then an indistinct voice. The caution shown, the force displayed about the church, surprised me. Surely no such effort would be made merely because of a vague suspicion that a man and girl might be hidden within. The leaders all knew that I was not likely to surrender without a fight, and that I was armed, yet this could hardly account for such preparation.

Could it be they really had a faint glimmer of the truth? that they realized the possibility of a Confederate raiding party in the neighborhood? They had shot Harwood's picket, and knew him to be a southern cavalryman from the uniform he wore.

This might account for the display of force with which they invested the church before demanding admission. No doubt the heavy log walls looked formidable, and mysterious in the moonlight. But, if they really suspected a garrison within, why should their line be thus extended, within easy musket shot of the windows? The conclusion I arrived at was, that Fox made this open display of force in the hope of avoiding bloodshed. He desired to capture instead of kill, and wished above all else to protect Noreen from danger. If we were alone within the church, escape was clearly impossible, and the probability strong that no resistance would be attempted.

The silence, the long wait, got upon my nerves. I could see little, and the few sounds reaching my ears conveyed no information of value. What were those fellows doing? What could cause their delay? The soldier behind me was humming softly; a foot scraped on the floor to the right; I caught the soft swish of Noreen's skirt as she changed position; the moonbeams glimmered on a lifted rifle-barrel; there was all about a suppressed sound of breathing. Good Lord! would they never move! What could they possibly be doing out there?

A half dozen blows rang sharp on the wood of the outer door. Not a sound answered from within, although I could feel the men straighten up, and sense

the sharp intake of breath. Again the blows crashed, as if struck by the butt of a musket.

“Open up in there!” roared a voice, so muffled as to have no familiar sound, “or we’ll break down the door. Come, Mister Spy; we’ve got you trapped.”

“Sergeant Wyatt, the lieutenant wants yer,” the whispered words swept down the line of waiting men, and I hurried forward. Harwood was in the dark vestibule close beside the big door.

“That you, Wyatt?” he asked softly, uncertain as to my identity. “They are after you, and have no idea anyone else is here. You answer, and warn them what they’re up against. I don’t mind a fight, but am hardly ready to commit murder.”

“Do you hear me in there, Wyatt?” the gruff voice without called. “This is your last chance; come, don’t be a fool. We know you are there, and there couldn’t a rat get out, and not be seen.”

“Who are you?” I asked. “I want to know who I am dealing with first.”

“I am Major Moran, Twenty-first Ohio Infantry.”

“Is Captain Fox there?”

“Yes — here Fox; the fellow wants to talk with you.”

There was a sound of movement without, the murmur of a word or two spoken in subdued tones; then

Fox's voice raised to carry through the intervening wood.

"Sorry this happens to be my job, Wyatt," he said. "I am not in command, and therefore can offer no conditions of surrender. But for Miss Harwood's sake I hope you will not attempt to fight; we've got a total force out here of over two hundred men."

"So I see," I answered coolly, "including Cowan, and my old friend the lieutenant. Quite a compliment to send half a regiment after one man."

"Our having such a force is largely accident," he responded somewhat stiffly. "But that is neither here nor there; your escape is impossible."

"I am not considering escape," and I spoke loud enough to be heard clearly. "This is going to be a fight, Captain Fox — a real fight."

"A fight! What, you alone?"

"Oh, no; there are men enough in this church to make it quite interesting. That is why I warn you — we are soldiers, not murderers."

"What! You think that bluff will work?"

"Captain Fox," broke in Harwood bluntly, his voice nervously sharp. "I command Troop 'C,' Third Kentucky Cavalry. This is no bluff, sir. I give you fifteen minutes to withdraw your men; at the expiration of that time we open fire."

The surprise, the shock, of this unexpected development and threat was plainly evident. I heard Fox step back from the door, and speak earnestly to some one; Moran swore savagely.

"What force have you?" he roared, the insane question causing Harwood to laugh outright.

"Come, and find out," he answered mockingly. "It is no trouble to show goods. Better go back to the other end now, Sergeant," he added in lower voice, and gripped my hand. "The ball is about to open. Where is my lady cousin?"

"I put her on guard over the prisoner. She will be out of range there, and have something to do."

"And gives you another fighting man — I see. Queer duck, that preacher — a bit of a knave to my notion, and one of the finest liars I have ever heard; he'll bear watching. Ah! our friend the major has come to his senses — look yonder! They are moving back out of range."

"Ay! and concentrating a heavier body of men this way."

"Of course; the first assault will be from the front. Tell Wharton to spare me two or three more men, and send a couple from your end. They may make a rush from all directions, but the real fight will be here; they are going to try us out, that is certain."

“ You can trust Fox for that ; he is a fighting man, whatever may be the inclination of the major — and Cowan is a wolf. Listen ! that is his voice now.”

I walked back to my station, speaking to both Wharton and O'Hare as I passed. The men we detached hurried to the front, and I took the vacant place of one of them at the open window, back of the pulpit. The line of men threatening this end of the building had been drawn aside, out of direct rifle range, and seemed to be grouped opposite each corner, and were so closely bunched together as to make any estimate of their numbers impossible. They were only shapeless shadows, with moonlight gleaming from their weapons ; and an occasional voice breaking the ominous silence. What their purpose might be in assuming such formation could not be determined ; were they merely guarding against an effort on our part to break away ? or did they contemplate an assault in conjunction with the larger force at the front of the church ? No further movement, or word, gave me any clue, but the manifest lack of ordinary military formation caused me to suspect that these fellows were Cowan's guerrillas, and that the reinforcement of cavalymen had been sent elsewhere. Once a man passed between the two bodies, bending low as he ran.

There remained nothing to do but wait their

action, ready for whatever might occur. I passed along the wall from man to man, assuring myself each was at his station, with loaded weapon, and well filled cartridge belt.

"The fight will begin in front," I whispered, unable to distinguish faces, "and no firing here until I give the word."

In the darker corner where the prisoner sat motionless against the log wall, my eyes could distinguish nothing.

"Noreen."

"Yes," and she stood up. "Couldn't you see me?"

"Not the faintest shadow. Your prisoner is quiet?"

"He hasn't even spoken, and as his hands and feet are bound, he is very easily guarded. You think they will attack?"

"Beyond question; they are getting ready now, and I can only remain here a moment. I — I wanted to thank you for the choice you made."

"You mean my coming with you? You are glad I did?"

"Yes, very glad," I said earnestly, "for you are just as safe here, and — and I would rather have you near me. This may prove a desperate struggle; we are terribly outnumbered — and — and, well you

know you — you trusted yourself to me — you are under my protection.”

There was no answer; perhaps I had said too much. I stood waiting, other words burning on my tongue. God, I loved her — but I could not understand; could not venture to break the mystery of that silence. Suddenly a volley roared out, startling in the stillness, the simultaneous crash of fifty muskets, the speeding bullets thudding into wood. I heard one cry of agony — a shout of command — the sharp bark of carbines — then a grim, threatening yelp of voices. One leap brought me to the window, with gun-barrel thrust forward across the sill. The two black shadows were disintegrating, breaking up, the units spreading out like an opening fan, in headlong rush toward the door at the south corner. There was no firing, no flash of powder, just that wild yelping, as though a pack of wolves smelt blood, and that reckless dash across the moonlit open. I saw figures, not faces, a gleaming of poised weapons, a huddle of leaping bodies.

“Fire!” I roared, my voice rising above the hideous din. “Give it to them!” and pulled trigger.

I have no clear knowledge of what followed — it was all so quickly over with; a mere mad moment crowded with vague glimpses, vanishing and chang-

ing in the lurid light of the guns. The whole interior of the church blazed and echoed, the smoke choking us with its fumes, the noise stunning our ears. I heard the chug of bullets flattening against the logs, smothered oaths, the crash of an overturned bench, a scream as shrill as a woman's that made my heart leap, and Harwood's voice calling out the same word again and again. But although I heard all this, I hardly knew it, my whole thought rivetted on those black figures in front of me — those reckless devils we had to kill, or drive back. And we did it! From every window, from every hastily smashed pane beside the door, we poured our fire — the carbines spitting into the dark, their sharp barking incessant. Barrels grew hot, the smoke drove back choking into our faces, but we pulled triggers, aiming as best we could in the moon-gleam, now changed to a red mist. They stopped; hung for a moment motionless, the ground dotted with the dead; then tried again. There was a roar of musketry, the crack of rifles; bullets chugged into the logs, and came crashing through the windows. Glass showered upon us, and the man next me went over like a log; someone struck me across the face with a bloody hand, and a shot splintered the stock of my gun, numbing my arm to the shoulder. I gripped another weapon out of the stiffening fingers of the man on the floor,

firing again blindly into the smoke cloud. For an instant I could see nothing but that white vapor tinged with red and yellow flame; then some breath of air swept it aside, and the attackers were drifting back, running and stumbling. There were motionless bodies on the ground — a half dozen in a heap before the door; with here and there a figure crawling in painful effort at escape.

“Stop firing!” I cried, “they’ve had enough. Pass the word to those men at the door.”

The fight at the front held longer, yet it was scarcely five minutes when the last gun cracked, and a strange silence took the place of that hideous uproar. For an instant not even a cry from the wounded broke the stillness, the men leaning out of the windows watching the disorganized retreat. Then someone gave an exultant yell, and voice after voice caught it up, the old church echoing to the wild battle-cry of the South.

“Steady men, steady!” shouted Harwood from the door of the vestibule, his voice cleaving the din like the blade of a knife. “This is only the first act. Load!”

CHAPTER XXX

A WAY OF ESCAPE



HE light of the moon streamed in through the south windows in a flood of silence, revealing the overturned benches, the moving figures along the walls, the smoke cloud drifting upward to the rafters. The lieutenant, after a brief word to his men in the vestibule, picked his way down the narrow aisle, stopping an instant to question Wharton and O'Hare. With one quick glance through the window, I stepped down from the pulpit platform to meet him. He was bare-headed and coatless, and even in that dim light I could perceive a dark stain, like oozing blood, on the front of his shirt.

"You are wounded?" I exclaimed.

"Nothing to worry over," he replied easily, his eyes laughing, "a mere touch in the shoulder, which, however, has put my left arm out of commission. Ah! fair cousin!" and he held up his hand in sudden greeting. "We who are about to die, salute you."

"Do not say that," she pleaded. "Surely the victory is ours."

"Ay! we win the first round, but it has cost heavily. I doubt if we have such luck again. Yet forgive me; those were careless words, but the Harwood breed are given to intemperate speech." He turned to me. "What loss have you, Wyatt?"

"Two wounded, and one killed," I answered soberly. "We had Cowan's guerrillas to meet out there."

"Yes, I know; the infantrymen stormed the front, and the troopers peppered the side windows. They meant to keep us all busy, and try out our strength — O'Hare got the least of it, and never lost a man; Wharton has three down, while they got five of my lads. The front doors are fairly riddled; a good blow with the butt of a tree will send them crashing in."

"You believe they will attack again!"

"Lord — yes! They know now what they are up against. That man Fox is a soldier; he and a dozen others were at the door. They'll consolidate next time, trust to the weight of numbers, and break through. They respect us now, but we haven't licked the fight out of them by a long chalk. I'm going to take three of your men."

"That leaves only one to a window."

"You will have to get along. If the attack develops at your end I'll reinforce you; but it will not

— the whole kit and caboodle are coming straight for those doors — Fox knows their condition. Well, that's enough; there is too much to be done to stand here talking — send me the men at once."

He whispered a word to her, some good-natured pleasantry, I thought, as he bowed over her hand as though they parted in a gay parlor; then turned laughing away, and picked his passage down the aisle, a slender, debonair figure, whistling a gay camp tune. I stared after him, scarcely able to comprehend such gay-spirited recklessness, when he stopped suddenly, and faced about.

"Do what you can for your wounded, Wyatt," he called back, his voice instantly serious, "and keep my fair cousin out of the ruck."

Several figures fell in behind him as he went forward — the men he had asked for from Wharton and O'Hare — all disappearing within the blackness of the vestibule. Leaving one man alone posted at each opening, I had the others of my small company bear the two wounded men to the further corner, making them as comfortable as possible. The dead man was laid out on one of the benches, and then the three selected for that duty were sent to join the lieutenant. This depletion of force left me a window to defend alone against the second attack, the opening to the left of the pulpit,

next to the corner in which lay the wounded men, and the prisoner. As I crossed the platform, and took my place, Noreen arose from beside one of the bodies, and her hands grasped my arm.

"The soldier who was shot in the chest has just died," she said, her voice trembling. "He — he tried to tell me something, but — but it was too late."

"And the other man?"

"His hurt is not so serious. I tore my skirt and bound it up, but there was no water. I — I wish he wouldn't groan so."

Her face, white in the moonlight, was uplifted; I even thought I could see the glint of tears in the eyes. Suddenly a great wave of sympathy, of regret, seemed to sweep over me, and I leaned the carbine against the wall, and clasped both her hands in mine.

"We grow accustomed to groans in war," I said swiftly, "but what unmans me is your being here exposed to all this danger."

"Oh, no one will hurt me; I am not afraid for myself — truly I am not. Captain Fox would never permit them to harm me."

"True; if Fox comes through alive; but Cowan and Raymond are both here also, and I know not which I distrust the more. I did wrong to permit

your ever coming with me; to risk your life in so desperate a game."

"Do not say that, Tom," her voice eager and earnest. "I am no worse off here than I would be if you had left me in Lewisburg. It was my choice, and even now I would rather be here with you. Why," she paused, drawing in a quick breath, "if — if I had remained behind I might be helplessly in the grip of Anse Cowan! Have — have you forgotten that?"

"No, I had not forgotten; but there is danger enough here — more than you realize. You have never seen men mad with battle lust, crazed from victory. They see through a red mist, and forget sex. They are coming in here presently, firing and killing, smashing their way through from wall to wall. Your cousin is not the kind to ever raise a white flag — he'll go down fighting, and his men beside him. I've been thinking of it all, my girl, and there is one thing I want you to do now, before the final assault comes."

"What?"

"Let me send you out under flag of truce to the protection of Captain Fox. He'll guard you as he would his own daughter."

"And — and leave you men in here to die?"

"To take our chances, of course; that is a part of

the trade. Your remaining with us cannot change the result, whatever it may prove to be — and, with me, it is merely a choice between bullet and rope.”

She buried her face in her hands, but there was no sound of sobbing. I waited, ashamed of my inconsiderate words, yet when her eyes were again lifted they were tearless.

“I know,” she said, “and you feel that it will be best for you — for you, if I go?”

“Yes, Noreen,” earnestly. “The very knowledge that you are here saps my courage. Surely you can understand why this should be so, for the more desperate our defense the more ruthless our enemies will prove in the hour of victory. The very knowledge of what the result may be would almost lead me to surrender, and, to a less degree, your presence here must affect your cousin.”

“The lieutenant! Why to a less degree?”

“Because,” I broke forth swiftly, “you are less to him. This is your first meeting; there is no tie between you, except a distant relationship just discovered. His solicitude is merely the protection of a woman, while I cannot forget that you are my wife.”

“A temporary matter, a mere form. So you wish to forget?”

“I did not say that, and have never thought it.”

“Yet you regret?”

“Only because of the danger in which you have been plunged—here comes Harwood now.”

There was no mistaking the slender erectness of the man's figure even in that dim light, nor the cheerful sound of his voice, as he paused, glancing out through the side windows, and giving laughing greeting to the soldiers.

“Ah! my bold gunner of Staunton,” he exclaimed as he stepped onto the pulpit platform, “and is everything still quiet here? Now you know what it means when they sing if you want a good time jine the cavalry. Let me get a glimpse without.”

He stood gazing forth into the moonlight, and our eyes took in the same scene. Except for the dead bodies lying in the open, there was little to see, although a few figures, apparently of men, moved back and forth at a distance well beyond range.

“As I thought, Wyatt,” said the lieutenant, finally turning about. “They are massing their forces again at the front. My lady you will witness some real war presently.”

“They may delay the next attack till daylight.”

“No such luck; those fellows are soldiers, not Indians, and are anxious to get through with the job.”

“I have been urging your cousin to let us send

her out under flag of truce," I said quietly, "to the protection of Captain Fox."

"That is really what I came back here for," he admitted, "and we haven't any time to spare. What say you, fair cousin?"

She stood between us, and before she answered her eyes sought both our faces.

"Is this asked of me on your account, gentlemen, or my own?"

"Your own, of course," he answered before I could speak.

"Then my choice is to stay." Suddenly I felt her hand on mine. "You will not refuse me this privilege, Tom?"

"No," reluctantly; yet at the same time strangely delighted at the prompt decision, "but I thought the other best."

Harwood laughed lightly.

"Again the blood," he said gaily. "Bah! so far as I was concerned the asking was mere form; the answer was already in the lady's eyes. But I must go back to my lambs."

"You have secured the door?"

"The best we can; braced it with benches solid to the wall. The wood will not resist long, but 'twill make an ugly abatis for the Yanks to clamber in over."

He lifted his cap gallantly, and turned away, humming some gay tune softly as he felt his way along the moonlit aisle. His very light-heartedness left me sober and depressed. She must have realized all this, for her handclasp tightened.

"You are sorry? You wished me to go?"

"I hardly know, Noreen; I have every confidence in Fox — who is making that noise? is it the preacher?"

He was propped up against the wall, not far from us, and I bent over, noting how he was bound. Instantly I cut the cords, and began rubbing the man's wrists to restore circulation.

"I never noticed you were strung up like that, Nichols," I said earnestly. "Who did the job?"

"The sergeant," he answered, choking. "I tried ter speak as soon as I saw you an' the lady yere, but I couldn't git the gag out 'er my mouth. Bend down a bit lower; I don't want none o' them sojers ter hear."

"All right — what is it?"

"Yer ol' Jedge Wyatt's boy, ain't yer?"

"Yes."

"An' she's the darter o' Major Harwood?"

"This is Noreen Harwood."

"I thought so, but thar ain't hardly light 'nough fer me ter be sure. I married yer over cross ther

mountings — an' is Anse Cowan along with them Yanks out thar?"

"Yes, and all the gang, excepting old Ned, who was shot last night."

"You shot him?"

"Well, it was my pistol; we were fighting together." Suddenly a thought swept through my mind. "See here, Nichols: you are in as bad shape as we are. Anse has treated you like a dog, and he will never forgive you for that marriage, even if it was performed to save your life —"

"It wasn't," he chuckled. "I wa'n't afeerd yer would shoot. I wus thet mad at Anse I didn't care; but I reckon he'll 'bout skin me alive if ever he kitches me yere."

"Do you know of any way out?"

He glanced about cautiously, to assure himself that no soldier was within earshot.

"The baptistry."

"The what?"

"The baptistry under the pulpit; this is a Baptist church, and ther is an opening in the floor just back of where you are. Feel a little to the left — yes, about thar — don't you touch an iron ring? What? well thar's one thar, an' it lifts two puncheon slabs spiked tergether."

"Yes, but what is below — just a tank?"

His voice trembled with eager excitement, and he gripped me tightly.

"I ain't afeerd ter tell you, cause I knew both yer daddies, an' — an' I reckon yer'll take me 'long with yer, won't you? Yer won't leave me yere fer ter face that Anse Cowan? Ye'll promise me that?"

"Of course, Nichols," I said soothingly, the man's cowardice almost disgusting, "if you show us a way of escape we'll go together if the chance comes — what is it? speak quick."

"I — I know the ol' trail over the mountings down ter Covington; I reckon as how you couldn't never git thar without me. I — I thought it all out while I was lyin' yere trussed up like a turkey, but they never giv' me no show fer ter got loose. Now if you folks will cut this yere rope offen my legs I'll show yer how fer ter git out — an' nobody'll never know nuthin' 'bout it."

"Explain first," I said shortly. "As far as trust goes I have confidence in you, Nichols, just so far as I can see you. What is below?"

"Five steps leadin' down inter a wood tank," he explained slowly, realizing that his only hope of release lay in a full description. "It's empty now, an' dry as a board; ain't been a baptism yere in six months. The place whar' the water runs out is at the

south side, right down 'gainst the bottom; ther cover ter the opening is screwed tight by a wheel. Ol' Ned Cowan made ther contraption, an' yer kin stand on ther upper step an' open an' shut the thing, an' never git yer feet wet."

"The entire cover comes off?"

"Sure, if yer unscrew it fer enough."

"And how big is the opening?"

"Wal, I don't jist know, but I've crawled through thar fixing a leak, an' if I did it onct, I reckon I kin again. 'Taint mor'n 'bout six feet beyond ther wall till it hits the edge o' ther ravine. Thet's why the Yanks didn't make no attack on thet side o' ther church — thar ain't no room."

The whole situation lay clear before me. I had no thought of utilizing this unexpected opportunity myself, for I meant to stay with the others, and perform my part of the fighting to the end. But here was protection, and possible escape, for Noreen. Yet could the preacher be trusted? Would he play fair if I released him, and left them alone together? Did not his interests also lie in getting away safely? What act of treachery could he commit? and, besides the girl was armed.

"How do you light this church?"

"Candles mostly," surprised at the question, "yer ain't goin' fer ter light up, are yer?"

"Not here — no; but below; where is there one?"

"I reckon on thet thar shelf in the pulpit yer'll find a dozen er so."

"Bring a couple here, Noreen."

She slipped across silently, and came back with two in her hand.

"You are going to try to get away?" she whispered cautiously.

"No, not now. An opportunity may come later. If it was possible to slip all these men out I would gladly do so — but it is already too late for any such attempt. But there is a chance for you, and it is even barely possible that, when all hope of defense is over, I may find some way of joining you."

"You — you promise that?" she asked. "If I consent to go, you — you will come later if you can?"

"Yes; I will pledge myself to accept every chance, when I can do no more fighting. I'll come to you, if I live. Now, Nichols, listen — I am going to set you free, and permit you to slip down through that trap door with this lady. She is armed, and she knows how to shoot. Attempt one treacherous trick and you pay the penalty."

"I ain't thet kind," he whined.

"Oh, yes you are; but it will never pay this time.

Don't take your eyes off him, Noreen; the moment that trap door closes light the candle, and keep the revolver ready. Make him unscrew the cap, and leave it off out of the way. Set the candle down in one corner as far back as possible. You better go out first."

"I — I am not to wait for you?" bewildered.

"Not in there — no; outside, for they might fire the building. Nichols, where is the best place for the two of you to hide so I could find you?"

"In the woods to the west; there is a trail half way down the ravine a climbin' up — an ol' hog trail."

My fingers touched his throat, and I bent lower staring straight into his eyes.

"Now, mark well what I say, Nichols. I am going to release you, and give you a chance to get away. But you stay, with the woman — do you hear! Stay with her until you both reach the Confederate lines at Covington. If I ever get out of here alive, and learn you have attempted any trick, I'll run you down, Nichols, if it takes ten years. Now I'll cut the rope, and you creep over to where that ring is in the floor, and wait my order."

Evidently his limbs were numb from the tight cord, for he crept the few feet painfully, and then sat up rubbing the afflicted parts with both hands.

I swept one glance out through the window, and then about the dim interior, endeavoring to locate the men nearest us. Only one stood close enough to observe our movements, and I sent him with a message to the sergeant.

“Now, Noreen,” I whispered swiftly, “this is the best time. Take these papers; they are for Jackson; give them to the first Confederate officer you meet, and have them forwarded at once. Don’t trust Nichols for a single moment out of range of your revolver.”

“You will not come?”

“Not now; you would not wish me to desert my comrades — would you?”

“Oh, I do not know! I do not know. It is so hard to decide. You really wish me to go? It will please you?”

“Yes.”

“And you will come if — if you can? I am to wait, and — and hope for you?”

“I pledge you my word, dear girl.”

She clung to my hands, her face uplifted in the moonlight.

“I — I am your wife,” she said softly, “and I — I want you to —”

Three shots rang out clear and distinct without, and a voice shouted hoarsely.

“Stand to it, lads!” cried Harwood from the dark vestibule. “The Yanks are coming!”

I swung her light form across the platform to where Nichols crouched.

“Quick now, both of you! Careful; don’t fall, Noreen! Go on, man; I’ll close the trap — and God help you if you don’t remember!”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE END OF DEFENSE



HAD no time for thought — action called me. Yet her last unfinished sentence rang in my memory. Could it be that she cared also? that out of this strange association there had grown an awakening interest? Could she have meant that? Was that what she sought to say in those final words? God, I would have given much to know, yet the faith that it was so flamed up in my heart instantly, and seemed to blot all else out. For a single moment I stood there motionless, my feet on the lowered trap, dimly conscious of the uproar about me, yet scarcely able to realize the imminence of the peril. They were pouring volleys into the front door — the roaring of discharge ending in the sound of splintered wood, and sharp cries of pain. Carbines cracked in response, and Harwood's voice sounded continually through the hideous discord.

“Get back, men! get back! ay, beyond the partition, you fellows in front there! No, don't leave the windows; they'll charge presently, and there is no use firing those carbines now — the range is too

long. Load again — load! and stand ready. Wyatt!”

“Here, sir.”

“Any work for you there?”

“No; only a half dozen Yanks in sight from this end.”

“Bring all but two men, and come here! Wharton, O’Hare, stand ready to take a hand. Ah! there the blue-bellies come, lads — now give them the lead! fire! damn you — fire!”

The little squad of us leaped down the aisle, and Wharton’s and O’Hare’s men clambered over the benches, cursing and yelling. Already the smoke of the carbines filled the church, and we could see little except in the flash of the gun-fire. The swirl of bodies hurled me to the right, away from where Harwood stood, and brought me in front of the opposite door. Through this opening, and the narrow window beyond, I got a glimpse outside — at a black mass of men sweeping straight toward us, their guns gleaming viciously, their voices echoing in savage shout. It was a mere glimpse, an infernal vision, and, almost at the same instant, they came crashing against the shattered door, beating it down with their gun-stocks, and leaping through into the maze of overturned benches littering the vestibule. The door fell in splinters, the frenzied assailants plunging

headlong among the debris, yet hurled forward by the mad impetus of those behind. The discharge of guns lit up the restricted space with red glare, giving us sight of faces, of brandished weapons, of wiggling, advancing forms. It was a glimpse into the pit, a scene of horror never to be effaced from memory. How they got through that tangle of death I know not. Into their very faces we poured our fire — our own men, caught within the narrow space, striking at them with clubbed guns — but they were too many to be held. Over the dead poured the torrent of living, firing, cursing, striking, jamming the few gray-jackets against the inner wall, and, in two resistless streams, hurling themselves against both vestibule doors.

Wedged in the portals I saw all this so clearly that each detail stands out in memory — the infuriated faces, the falling bodies, the disfiguring blood-stains, the savage glint of steel. Those who came first were not soldiers — they were Cowan's men, gaunt, rough fellows, bearded and dirty, their fierce curses sounding above the uproar. And they fought like fiends, driven by Cowan's voice, and pressed remorselessly forward by the cavalrymen behind. I saw him once, a blood spot on his cheek, and I fired over the heads of those between us, but though he fell, he came to his feet again and was

swept to one side by the rush of men. I saw all this, and no more; it was like a flash on the screen — and then everything became an indistinct blur. They were upon us, jammed in the narrow doorways, each man fighting for life. I used gun and revolver, fist and stock; I knew not who stood, who fell; in the red mist before me were black shapes, hateful faces, and I struck to kill. Twice I lost foot and fell, but was up again, fronting them. I stepped on dead bodies, slipped in pools of blood; falling men caused me to stagger; a slug of lead tore burning through my shoulder; a glancing knife blade ripped my forearm. I had no time, no room, in which to reload; my hands gripped the hot carbine barrel, and I swung the stock like a flail.

It was stifling — I could hardly breathe; the room choked with smoke, our bodies reeking with sweat. A gripping hand ripped my shirt open, clutching for the throat, and I jabbed carbine barrel into the bearded face. Yet we could not hold; could not stand against that torrent — there were not enough of us. Inch by inch they won through the door; we could kill, but not stop them, and they hurled us back, stumbling over the dead, clambering across overturned benches, but unable to stem the increasing tide. We were all together now — Harwood, Wharton, O'Hare — the sole handful left, and

we made a fight of it, the best we could. There was a moment's pause, the merest instant in which to breathe, and my eyes met Harwood's. He was naked to the waist, hatless, blood dripping from a cut over one eye, the stock of his carbine shattered.

"Ah, gunner of Staunton," he called out cheerily, although his voice cracked with dryness. "Didn't I tell you if you wanted a good time to jine the cavalry?"

"Forward, men! forward!" It was Fox's voice, although I saw nothing of him. "Once more, and it's over with — forward!"

"Now, lads, meet them!" burst out Harwood. "About me, Third Kentucky — here they come!"

They drove us in so as to encircle us, yet the jumble of benches served as some protection to our rear. Perhaps the fact that there were Yankees between us and the pulpit prevented firing for we met hand to hand in a death grapple. I have seen battles, yet nothing like that; it was as though beasts of the jungle fought; men struggled with naked hands, struck death blows, fired into each other's faces, trampled over writhing bodies, cursing, or yelling defiance as they fell. We scarcely knew friend from foe, blue from gray. I cannot even tell what occurred to myself in those breathless moments. I know I fought madly, blindly — again and again

sweeping a space clear with my weapon; hands gripped my throat, my hair, and I tore loose; fingers clutched at my legs, but I kicked free. I was conscious of blows, of wounds; I knew when Harwood fell, and was trampled under foot; I heard O'Hare scream; I saw the hated face of Anse Cowan in the ruck and leaped for him, but who my mad blow struck I could not tell. Some rush, some quick pressure of bodies, hurled me side-wise, caught me in a vise; I tripped over a dead man, staggered to my feet again. I got footing on the pulpit platform, and held it for an instant, my gun-barrel crashing into the mass of faces below. Wharton joined me, a bull mad with rage; I saw him rend the pulpit stand from the floor, and hurl it with all his strength into the ruck. Then twenty hands gripped him, hauling him down, a clubbed musket descended, and the sergeant pitched forward like a log of wood. There was a shot, the blow of a rifle barrel, and I went down, the very breath of life seemingly knocked out of me.

I fell on the platform, back of where the pulpit desk had stood, and a body lay across me. If I lost consciousness it was for no more than an instant, yet my whole body felt numbed and useless. I could scarcely move my fingers to unclasp them from the gun-barrel, and every breath I drew was in pain.

Still I realized all that happened, distinguished voices, and the shuffling of feet on the puncheon floor. I heard Fox shouting orders, as the mad hubbub ceased.

“That’s enough! that’s enough, men! It’s all over with. Here, Sergeant, round up those prisoners; God knows there are few enough of the poor devils left. Guard those able to walk outside. Now, Herzog, carry the wounded over here. What? Why, of course, you idiot, we are not savages — those fellows fought like men, and are to be treated decently. No distinction, mind you. Let the dead lie where they are till daylight, but don’t overlook a wounded man. Where’s Cowan? does anybody know?”

“Shot, sir; he’s here in this pile somewhere.”

“See if the fellow is alive. Who is his lieutenant?”

“I am, sir; my name’s Kelly.”

“Well get your damn crew of scoundrels out of here, what’s left of them. Do you hear! This is soldier work, and I want you fellows outside.”

“You used us all right when thar wus fightin’ ter do —”

“That’s enough, Kelly. I didn’t use you — Moran did; and you can go to him with your complaints. I know how you treat prisoners, and would

hang the whole of you, if I had my way. Now get out, and don't answer me — those are your orders. Lieutenant Raymond."

"He was here a minute ago, sir," a voice answered from the vestibule, "but he went outside. I think he was touched a little in one arm."

"Pity it wasn't in the mouth; has anyone seen a woman?"

No one answered.

"No! that's strange! Here Green, take a couple of men, and feel your way along the walls; Jasper make a light of some kind — who wants me? Colonel Moran? Tell him I am the only officer present, and I can't leave. By God! the place is a shamble!"

The searching party was to the right of me, against the black shadow of the wall. It was darker than ever in the church, as though a cloud obscured the moon, but far away a ruddy glow reflected along the beams overhead, as someone coaxed a reluctant torch into flames. A medley of sound arose all about me — the mutter of voices, the shuffling of feet, groans, and cries for assistance, with the occasional thumping of a musket stock on the floor, and the rattle of broken glass. This was my chance, my one and only chance to slip away unobserved. In five minutes more the searching party would find me

there, and bear me along with the others. I wiggled out from under the weight of the body lying across my legs, and groped about in the dark until my fingers encountered the ring embedded in the floor. I still lay thus, conscious of soreness in every muscle, afraid of attracting some eye if I moved, when a man leaped onto the platform, and strode across to the nearest window, his rough shoe actually grazing my hand as he passed. I heard him call some order to those without; then the thud of horses' hoofs to the left. The fellow leaned far out, watching.

There would be no better time than this, for no one else was within thirty feet of me, and the light of the sputtering torch still left the pulpit platform in shadow; Fox was at the other end of the church, his sharp voice rasping out orders. I got to my knees, and lifted the trap barely far enough to squeeze through. There was a gleam of light below, sufficient to reveal the dark outline of the steps leading down. Some eye might distinguish the glimmer, yet I thrust my body through the narrow opening noiselessly, and lowered the cover to the floor level. There was no cry, no sound indicating that the movement had been observed. I waited an instant, crouched breathlessly on the upper step, listening. Someone walked across, directly over my

head — the fellow who had been at the window, no doubt — and jumped from the platform to the floor. My eyes surveyed those contracted surroundings curiously. The candle, a mere fragment, burned dimly in one corner, revealing what appeared to be the interior of a huge box, with a platform built half across it, its outer edge protected by a low rail. The wood was damp, and water-soaked, half way up, but there was no unpleasant odor. A small wheel ingeniously arranged to operate a lever, occupied one end of the platform, and directly across was an opening in the side wall next the floor, barely large enough for a man's body to squeeze into. Nothing else was visible; no evidence left of the two who had already passed that way.

I slipped down the steps, and lowered my body silently to the damp floor. An instant I peered into the dark hole, satisfied that I could make the passage, and then extinguished the light. The conduit was stone-lined, but the blocks had been smoothly set, and, I knew, from the crisp freshness of the air, that the distance to be traversed was short. I entered the hole head first, dragging and pushing with hands and feet, eager to get quickly into the open. My body so blocked the opening that I felt stifled, nor could I perceive any gleam of light ahead, yet the passage was not really a difficult one, and almost

before I realized the possibility, my head and shoulders emerged into the outer air and I hung suspended over a rock ledge, staring blindly down into the unknown depths of a ravine. The ledge itself was barely wide enough to afford foothold, yet I succeeded in creeping out upon it, and then in standing upright. The shoulder of the hill was sufficiently steep and high to shut out all view of the log walls of the church, while below was a black void, out from which arose the faint splashing of distant water. But the church itself must have been lit up by this time, for a reddish glow of light tipped the bank above, and bridged the dark ravine. The rock ledge extended to the right, a fairly smooth path, and I followed it cautiously, finding no other available passage. It led gradually downward, until it seemed to merge into a beaten track, running directly south through a tangle of underbrush not far above the stream. The way was intensely black, yet not difficult to follow by the sense of touch, while the incessant roar of the nearby water blotted out all sound from above. Once I heard the crack of guns, but they sounded at a distance, and, looking up, I could perceive the red reflection on the trees lining the bank far above. But for these I was plunged in a black solitude, through which I must grope my way, each step liable to plunge me into

uncertain peril. A hundred yards, two hundred, and the trail swerved more to the right, and began to mount upward, zig-zagging among the trees. Slowly, cautiously, my head arose above the crest, and the moon, just peering out from behind the edge of a cloud, gave me glimpse along the level plateau.

CHAPTER XXXII

WITH NATURE'S WEAPON



THE right of where I lay was the outline of the church, the windows alight, several blazing torches, bobbing about within, revealing passing figures, although the distance was too great to permit any sound of voices reaching my ears. The rear door, however, stood wide open, and a considerable body of men were grouped there. Straight across from me, a squad of horsemen were moving northward, and a single rider was spurring rapidly between them and the church. The grove of trees where I was to meet Nichols and Noreen was to the left. It was dark and silent, a shapeless shadow, and the forest growth of the ravine extended far enough over the crest to hide my approach. Satisfied that no searching parties were near by, I advanced swiftly along the edge of this fringe of trees, yet taking every precaution. 'Twas well I did, for suddenly the horseman swerved, and rode straight toward me, through the moonlight. I sank down into the brush, revolver in hand, and waited. Once he stopped, and called out something; then came on

along the edge of the wood, walking his horse slowly. The rider was not a soldier, but beyond that fact, evidenced by lack of uniform, I could make no guess as to his identity, although I believed him one of Cowan's guerrillas. A gun, poised and ready, forked out beside his horse's neck, and he leaned forward in the saddle, peering into the shadows. A few feet beyond me, he suddenly reined in his horse, and called again:

"That you, Lieutenant?"

A single figure seemed to emerge from among the trees — a mere shadow, formless and silent.

"Yes; who are you?"

"Kelly — Dean told me you were here; the damn fellow has got away, and the gurl with him."

"How do you know?"

"We've looked over every dead body, the wounded and prisoners, and searched every inch of the church — they're not thar, sir."

"By God! where could they have gone! They were there; he was anyhow, for I heard his voice. Did you talk with any of those living?"

"Thar ain't many ter talk ter. The Reb lieutenant is a goin' ter pull thro', I reckon, but he's hurt too bad ter talk. Enyhow Fox wouldn't give me no chance fer ter git nigh him. I asked a sojer, a young feller, an' he sed Wyatt an' the gurl wus both in

thar; he seed 'em tergether just afore we charged. But I'll be damned, if they're thar now."

Raymond muttered something, a smothered oath no doubt, and then burst forth:

"Well, good God, man! They are both flesh and blood. If neither are there then they must have found a way of escape. We had every side of the church guarded so a mouse couldn't get through in this moonlight — I saw to that myself."

"There were no guards on the east."

"Because there was no room to post any. The church walls are on the edge of the ravine; Cowan said there were none needed there."

"Wal," insisted the other, half angrily. "I didn't think so neither, no mor'n Anse did; but I reckon that's whar we made a mistake. Them two's skedaddled, an' thar warn't no chance fer 'em enywhar else. Thet's plan 'nough, ain't it? I don't know nuthin' 'bout whut's thar, fur I never ain't been 'long thet edge, but if them two ever got out inter thet thar ravine they're thar yet, fer thar's no way leading out 'cept along ther trail yonder."

"What trail? Where?"

"Back thar, 'bout a hundred feet, I reckon — an ol' hog trail thet leads down ter the crick. Thar couldn't nobody cum up it without yer seein' 'em from here."

“And so you think they’re down there yet?”

“Sure; less they got wings they couldn’t a come up no other way.”

The lieutenant strode forward, and grasped the rein of the horse. I could see him clearly now, the moonlight on his upturned face.

“Then we’ve got them, all right,” he asserted, a new confidence in his voice. “You know the way down, don’t you, Kelly?”

“Hell, yes; I hid out thar fer six weeks onct. They call it the Devil’s Glen, an’, I reckon tain’t a bad name neither.”

“All right then; I’ve got three men here who’ll go with you. That will be enough. I’ll stay up here, so if the fellow slips by I’ll nab him. Jones — all of you come here. Come, Kelly, there’s a hundred dollars in this for you.”

“By God! it’s worth it, fer somebody’s liable ter get shot.” He rolled out of the saddle, but with evident reluctance. “I reckon I’ll let one o’ them sojers go ahead. Yer must want thet Reb powerful bad, Leftenant?”

“I do,” grimly, “dead or alive.”

Three other figures joined them; they were on foot, but I could see the guns in their hands, and the gleam of buttons in the moonlight. Raymond spoke swiftly, pointing with one hand, but his voice

was lowered so the words did not reach me. No doubt he was briefly explaining the plan, and giving orders. Kelly added a gruff sentence, and then the whole five tramped past me, the lieutenant leading the horse, and Kelly coming so close to where I lay I could have touched him with an extended hand. Scarcely venturing to breathe I watched their passage along the edge of the bluff, until they halted at the point where I had come up the trail. They remained grouped there for a moment, talking earnestly; then the shadow formed disintegrated, and Raymond and the horse alone remained distinguishable. I knew the others had disappeared in the blackness of the ravine, and that they were destined to search its depths in vain, for what little trail I might have left in my crawl upward could never be deciphered in that darkness. I waited motionless for what I believed to be ten minutes, anxious that the fellows get far enough down to be safely beyond ear-shot. At first I could hear them slipping and stumbling along the steep, stony path, but these sounds grew fainter and finally ceased. The lieutenant led the horse back a few yards, and fastened his rein securely to the limb of a tree; then took his own position within the brush shadow, where he could watch the head of the trail. From where I crouched I could no longer see the fellow.

I had no thought of going on, and leaving him there on guard. Not only did I feel an overwhelming desire to punish the man for his treachery and insolence, but I wished to gain possession of the horse. Such an opportunity as this was the gift of God, and I was only too eager to accept it. The wide plain in front of us was deserted, the cavalry troop having disappeared. The glare of torches had disappeared from within the church, which was now a mere shapeless shadow in the moonlight. My vision did not extend to the road in front, but there were sounds indicating that the Federal forces were either going into camp, or preparing to resume their march. Satisfied that my own way was clear, I crawled out to the edge of the line of brush; and arose silently to my feet. To reach Raymond I would have to pass where the horse was tied, and to approach on hands and knees would be liable to frighten the animal. Trusting that the lieutenant's whole attention would be devoted to the trail, and that he would anticipate no approach from behind, I walked straight forward, and laid hand on the horse's head. He smelt of me curiously, but made no noise, and, looking across his back, I could dimly perceive the man a few paces beyond. He stood erect, his back toward me, perfectly motionless, his entire consciousness concentrated on his guard. I stole forward step

by step, noiselessly. I was actually within reach of him, before some sense told him of my near presence, and he wheeled about only to find a leveled revolver staring him in the eyes.

"We meet again," I said coldly, "and it seems to be my luck to hold the cards."

"You! Good God! I thought —"

"I know what you thought, for I was within ten feet of you when you talked with Kelly. Put up your hands, Raymond! Yes, of course, but don't attempt any play — I only need an excuse to hurt you."

He glared at me savagely, yet his hands went up, although I could see him glance backward over one shoulder into the darkness of the ravine.

"You might make the jump," I said, drawing a revolver from his belt, "but to my best judgment there is a hundred foot sheer drop right here, and it would damage you some to take it. See," and I tossed the weapon over the edge, and we heard the sound as it struck on the rocks below. "I guess you'll not try that trick. And so you want me so badly you offer a reward, dead or alive? Isn't it rather my wife you want?"

"I don't believe she is your wife."

"Not after she gave you her word! That is hardly complimentary to the lady, Lieutenant.

However I haven't any reason to be jealous of you — Noreen knows you too well by this time; you proved yourself a treacherous cur in Lewisburg. Now turn around!"

There was no other weapon in his belt, and it never occurred to me that he might possess another secreted in his jacket; nor did I realize the desperate hatred of me which gave him reckless courage. What to do with the fellow obsessed my mind; I possessed nothing to securely bind him with; I could not leave him free, nor had I any desire to take him along with me. He settled the problem himself. Suddenly, his arms above his head, his eyes on mine, he kicked viciously, the heavy shoe striking my wrist, sending the revolver I held spinning into the grass a dozen feet away. With almost the same movement he was tugging at his jacket pocket. I saw the gleam of steel, and gripped his fingers just in time; my other hand, numbed by the blow dealt me, was, for the instant, useless, yet I struck him with my elbow full in the face. I had no grip that would hold, yet it tangled the revolver in the folds of cloth so he could not draw, and, with a snarl of baffled rage, he tore his fingers loose, and clutched at my throat with both hands. Back and forth we swayed on the very edge of the ravine, kept from plunging down into the black depths by the intervening fringe

of trees, savagely contending for the mastery. That he was a trained athlete, acquainted with every wrestler's trick, I knew in a moment, yet this gave me little fear — for this was to be a fight, no wrestling game. Strong, quick, agile as the man was, I never doubted I was his match, and, as I felt strength come back into my numbed hand, and realized that I could clinch it again, I felt coldly confident. Once, twice, I drove my knuckles into his exposed face, compelling him to loosen grip, and throw up his hands in protection. And then I had him; not that he was devoid of skill as a boxer — sooth he possessed tricks of defense unknown to me — but his was the professional knowledge of the West Point gym, while I had graduated from the rough school of the camp; where he had trained for points, for fancy milling, I had fought to win against desperate opponents. The difference told, for I beat him down, caring nothing for what blows reached me, so that I smashed in through his guard, and landed. Again and again I feinted with my right, and drove my left straight to the exposed jaws. I gave him no time to cry out, to even catch a full breath. There was no sound to be heard a hundred feet away. I became a machine, grimly determined, a desire to punish throbbing in my veins. He fought cat-like and foul, but I only laughed, and angered him. I drove

him out into the open where I could see better. I was fighting now, with no thought of protecting myself, only of hurting him. I tried for a knock-out but he blocked me, clinging desperately to my arm. I tore loose once more, flinging him aside bewildered and breathless.

“Now, Raymond,” I said, “that trick doesn’t work a second time. Stand up to it, you coward! You wanted a fight, and you are going to have one. What! the gun again? I guess not.”

He had jerked it out before I reached him, but my hand closed over his — the hammer fell, digging into the flesh of my thumb, and the pain maddened me; he staggered back from the impetus of my body, and I tore loose, the iron still imbedded in my flesh, and struck him. The pearl handle crashed to the side of his head, tearing my hand in jagged wound, but he went over, dropping to the grass as if dead. He gave no moan, no sound; for an instant his limbs twitched, and then he lay there, curled into a ball. I stared down at him, panting, scarcely realizing just what had occurred. An instant before he had been fighting like a tiger cat, now he was a motionless, grotesque shadow. Blood streamed from my lacerated hand, and I bound up the wound in a neckerchief stripped from around my throat, hardly conscious of the pain, my breath steadying,

my muscles growing tense. Then I bent down, and straightened the man out, upturning his face to the moon. He was not dead — there was a beat to his pulse; but the gash on his head was an ugly one; he would have a scar there while he lived. He lay like a dead man, his face ghastly, his thin lips drawn back from his teeth, and seemingly breathless. But for that faint, barely perceptible throb of the pulse, I would have thought him killed.

And now what? Kelly, and his followers, would not be gone long exploring the depths of the ravine — an hour at most would take them over every inch of it. We must have more of a start than that. There were troops yonder. Fox would never worry over the disappearance of Raymond, but Moran might; and he was in command. There was a squad of horsemen out there now, beyond the corner of the church, and riding southward — they might be in search of the missing lieutenant and his three troopers. I dare not leave the fellow where he was to recover consciousness, and give an alarm, or be discovered by others. There were two things possible to do — to roll the body into the ravine, or bear it with me. The first would be murder; the second a tax upon my physical strength which I might not withstand. Yet there was no other way, but to try the experiment.

I tossed the discarded revolver into the bushes, and struggled with the limp body until I was able to rise to my feet with the unconscious man dangling across my shoulder. He was of good girth and weight, but I succeeded in staggering the few yards necessary with the burden, and then hoisted him across the saddle, head and heels dangling. The horse snorted and circled to get away, frightened at his unusual burden, but I soothed the animal, and finally he sniffed at the man's legs, and stood still.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE TRAIL TO COVINGTON



AS I gripped the horse's rein, and turned him slowly around I heard a single shot fired in the gorge below, the sound echoing among the rocks, and a spark of fire gleamed through the darkness. It was far enough away to give me little concern, yet the report must have been heard by the cavalry squad now well out in the open, for they wheeled their horses and rode straight toward the ravine. Their course would bring them higher up, just to the rear of the church, yet, with suspicions once aroused, 'twas likely they would patrol the banks, seeking for some passage below. Confident the distance between us was sufficient to hide my movements so long as I kept well back in the shadow of the trees, I led the horse forward, advancing as rapidly as I dared to travel, using one hand to steady Raymond's body swaying across the saddle. It must have been a quarter of a mile, or more, to where the forest spread out from the bank into a dark tangle of trees, extending half across the ridge. The winding of the ravine took me out of sight of the body of horsemen

above, yet I knew they had galloped to the edge of the gorge, and were calling to whoever was below. I could hear the shouts, without catching the words, and even imagined I distinguished a faint cry in return. By slipping the lieutenant's belt over the saddle horn, thus preventing his limp body from sliding off, I urged the animal to a sharp trot.

What was before us in those dark woods was all conjecture — but I possessed infinite confidence in Noreen. The very silence, coupled with the fact that no sign of the two fugitives had been met with along the way, convinced me that they had safely attained the rendezvous, and were now there, anxiously awaiting my arrival. The time had not been long, and the girl would never consent to proceed alone with Nichols, until she had lost every hope of my joining her. He might not remain willingly in such close proximity to danger, but I could count on her to keep the fellow there until the last possible moment. We went down into a shallow gully, and then climbed the opposite bank, having to force a passage through thick shrub, I pressing the branches aside to prevent their scratching Raymond's face. He gave utterance to a groan, and I lifted his head, supporting it on my shoulder as we topped the rise. The horse shied, and I caught glimpse of a shadow flitting across an open space.

"Noreen!"

"Is it really you? I could not tell — the horse; the something across the saddle."

She came forward with a swift spring, not satisfied until her hand actually touched me.

"Oh, I am so glad — you are not even hurt?"

"Not seriously; battered up a bit — Nichols?"

"Yes, he is here; there beside the tree. Tell me what has happened! What have you here? Why it is a man," she shrank back, "a — a dead man!"

"No, not dead," I hastened to explain, unbuckling the belt, and lowering the still limp body to the ground. "Here, parson, don't let the horse stray. We cannot waste many minutes here; there are cavalymen scouting the edge of the ravine yonder, and they may come as far as this. That is why I brought the fellow along — to keep him from being found. Do you recognize the face, Noreen?"

It was dark and shadowy where we were and she was compelled to bend low to distinguish the features. Her lips gave a startled, half-suppressed cry:

"Why it is Lieutenant Raymond! You — you fought together? How did he come here?"

"I think he suspected we might manage to escape from the church. He was more anxious to capture me than he was to fight evidently, for I caught no

glimpse of his face during the melee. But he, and three troopers, were hidden at the edge of the woods watching where the trail comes up from the ravine."

"Yes," breathlessly, "we saw them come across, just after the torches began to flare up inside the church. Then later another man rode along there."

"That was Kelly; he brought word that we had got away. I was within ten feet of them when they met. The lieutenant swore at the news, and sent the four men down the trail to search — he offered one hundred dollars for me, dead or alive."

She arose to her feet, but the darkness prevented my seeing the expression on her face.

"He did! this man?" she exclaimed, the horror of the thought visible in the tone. "Why, what is it to him? I do not understand why he should exhibit such bitterness — he was determined to convict you from the first. There was no feud between you two, was there?"

"Only Noreen Harwood," I answered, speaking softly. "But — look! the cavalry squad just passed across that open space; they are riding this way. Raymond will revive presently, and some of his men will find him here; Kelly will search as soon as he discovers the man is missing. Nichols, fasten the belt about his arms — yes, buckle it behind; a notch tighter. You know the trail?"

"I've been over it enough," rather sullenly. "Is Anse Cowan dead?"

"Yes; but that doesn't affect you at present. You are going to guide us to Covington. Hold the horse. Now Noreen."

She gave me her hand, and I helped her into the saddle. A horse neighed in the distance, but my fingers closed on the nostrils of the animal beside me in time to prevent response. Nichols stood motionless, a tall, shapeless figure, gazing back over the tops of the bushes. I drew my revolver, and touched him with it sharply on the arm.

"Go on," I said quietly, yet with a threat in my voice. "Attempt to run, or play any trick, and I drop you in your tracks."

He turned without a word, and silently pushed a passage through the shrub into more open woods, and I followed, grasping the horse's rein. A hundred yards further along we came into a beaten track, and began to mount upward along a rocky ridge, where the moon gave me good view. It was a scene of silent desolation. I took one glance backward, but trees shut off all glimpse of the church, and the plateau. I thought I heard a voice, or two, calling afar off, perhaps the cavalrymen again signaling Kelly in the ravine, but we had little to fear from them. Our trail could never be followed

before morning, and dawn would be three hours away. I slipped my weapon back into my belt, confident Nichols would make no attempt to desert. He was slouching forward, muttering something to himself as he walked, and never even turned his head to glance behind. I stole a look upward at the lady in the saddle, but did not venture to address her. She sat erect, her face slightly averted, both hands on the pommel. Twice I glanced upward, seeking the encouragement of her eyes, but her thoughts appeared to be elsewhere, and I plodded on, my heart grown heavy. Beyond doubt she realized now what the end was to be. In the rush and excitement of the past few days, her natural desire to save me from the death of a spy, she had found no time for thought, for consideration. She had merely obeyed the swift impulse of the moment. But now, riding this dark mountain trail, all immediate peril left behind, she was facing the future — and regret. Her father's death, her sudden abandonment of home and friends, her disloyalty to the cause with which her sympathies were enlisted, her forced marriage, came fresh to her memory like haunting phantoms. Once, I thought, she lifted a hand, and dashed a tear from her eye; and her head sank lower, as though she would hide her face. She was evidently ashamed, regretful, unhappy; if ever

she had cared for me, even in ordinary friendship, that feeling had changed into dislike — probably into actual hatred. I seemed to feel the change; to comprehend the growing horror with which she confronted the future. I wanted to tell her that I understood; that I sympathized; that I would never consent to stand between her and happiness. Plan after plan flashed through my mind — she should be free; she should go to her own friends, and never see me again. I would arrange to drop out of her life as suddenly as I had come into it. But the impetuous words died unuttered on my lips. Steadily we pushed on through the darkness, no word exchanged between us, slipping and sliding along the rocky trail, following Nichols down into a black valley, and then up again to a steep, narrow ridge. All about us was the night, and the silence.

Then the dawn broke, the black gloom fading into gray, the clouds of fog in the deep valley below us rising slowly until the rays of the rising sun lifted them to the mountain tops, reddening the mist into grotesque beauty, and revealing the green glades beneath. It was a wild, desolate scene, and we paused on the edge of what seemed a sheer precipice to gaze. Even Nichols stopped, and looked down, pointing to the ridge of rock along which the barely perceptible trail ran.

"You'll hav' ter pick yer way mighty careful 'long thar," he said slowly. "'Tain't jist safe fer a hoss, nohow, but I reckon he'll pick his own way all right. Thar's a cabin 'round behind that bend whar we mout git a bite ter eat."

"Who lives there?"

"A fellar named Larrabee; but I reckon thar won't be noboddy ter hom' but the ol' woman — Bill's conscripted."

"Go on down," I said after a moment, "and we'll follow slowly. How far away is Covington?"

"'Bout twenty mile — in the next valley beyond them hills."

He disappeared around a sharp ledge, and Noreen and I were alone — alone, it seemed to me, in all the world. I dare not even look at her, as I helped her out of the saddle. Tired from the long hours of riding along the rough trail, she staggered slightly on her feet, and her hands clasped my arm. Our eyes met, and in the depths of hers was the mist of tears.

"Tom," she said earnestly, her voice faltering. "I cannot stand this any longer. I — I must know — what — what I am to you?"

"To me!" I echoed, the blood leaping in my veins. "Do you not know? Can you feel the slightest doubt?"

“Doubt! it is all doubt. You have spoken no word to guide me. You married me to save me from Anse Cowan. You permitted me to come with you because I would consent to nothing else. I do not even know that it is your choice that I go on beside you into the valley.”

“Noreen,” and I had her hands in mine. “It is my choice that you go with me all the way through life — dear girl, I love you.”

The long lashes hid her eyes, but her cheeks were crimson; then I looked down into the blue depths, through the tear mist, and read my answer.

THE END

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